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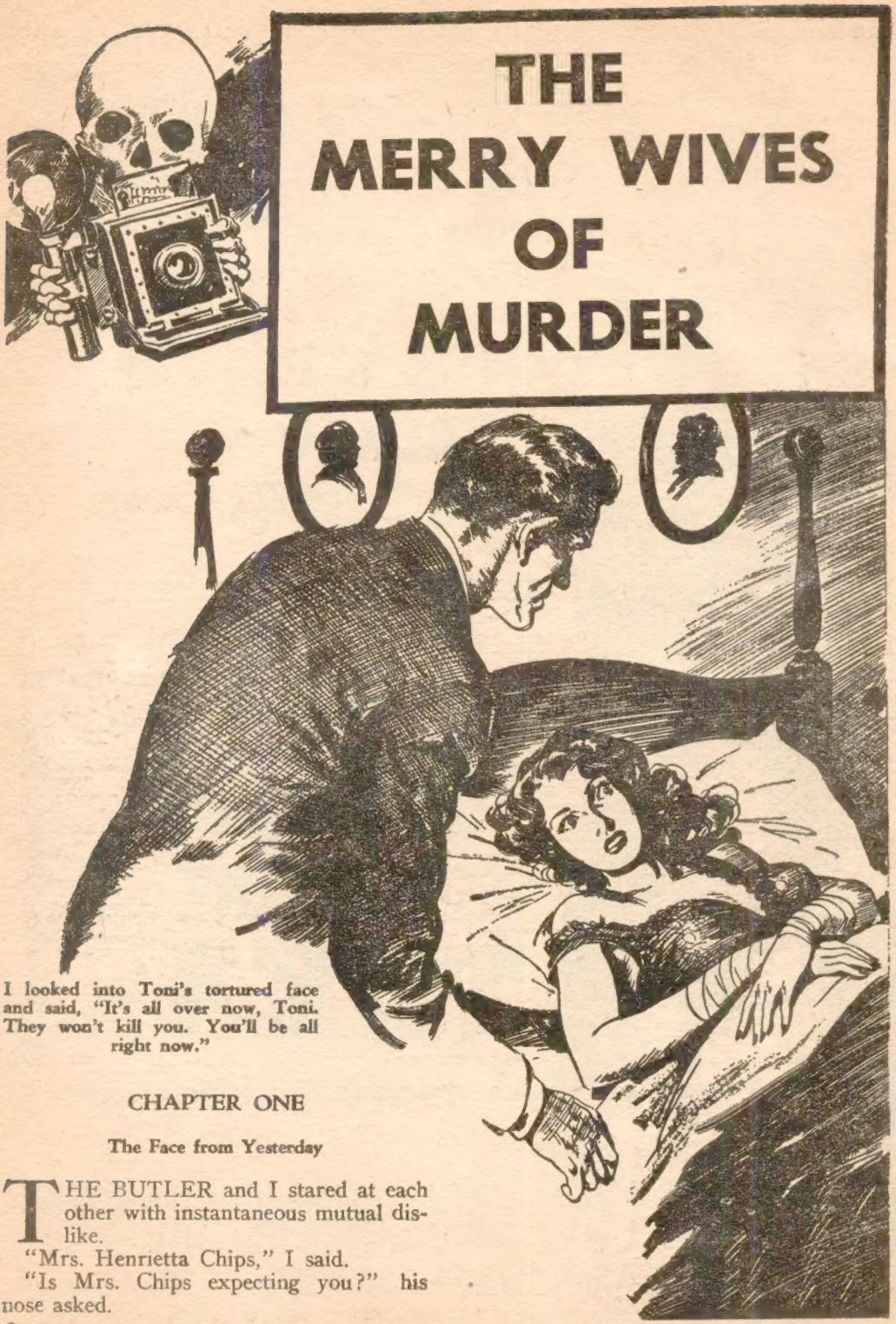
THE MERRY WIVES OF MURDER



I looked into Toni's tortured face and said, "It's all over now, Toni. They won't kill you. You'll be all right now."

CHAPTER ONE

The Face from Yesterday

THE BUTLER and I stared at each other with instantaneous mutual dislike.

"Mrs. Henrietta Chips," I said.

"Is Mrs. Chips expecting you?" his nose asked.

Women? I was combing them out of my hair! First, there was lissome little Toni Chips—an artist whose skill with a palette knife wasn't limited to the easel. Then there were Charlotte, my wide-eyed brunette nurse, and Jean, the mayor's fireball wife. But for females en masse, *gents, I give you the forty-three erring wives of Pacific City, who made up for stooping to folly—by staging the damnedest bistro-busting raid ever to make homicide history!*

Thrilling Crime Novel

By

PETER PAIGE

"I'm Kidd. She's expecting me."

He swung the massive door all the way open and stood aside for me to pass. I removed my fedora and he snatched it. He snatched my copy of that morning's Pacific City *Times* from under my arm. I snatched it back from him.

"On your way, flunky," I told him. "Make with the feet."

I could see his hate for me would ripen

into a beautiful passion. He had an articulate glare. He strutted the glare and my hat out of sight and left me gaping at an oil painting on the paneled wall that represented either a sunset ringed by human eyes or a tomato omelette surrounded by spotted pearls. The signature on the lower right hand corner was: Toni Chips.

Non-objective art. They used to call it surrealism, and before that, stream-of-conscious painting. And before that—impressionism. When I was a kid we called it "designs" and let it go at that.

"Mrs. Chips will see you now," the butler's nose said.

"Let's go."

I followed his strut into a room that couldn't make up its mind. There were enough books to call it a library; but the stuffed animal heads staring glassily down from the walls would have made a nice inventory for any modest taxidermist—and I have seen fewer paintings in many a small museum. The paintings were related to that delectable sample in the hall. The prize of these, over a fireplace large enough to contain the next atomic test, was a portrait of a purple nude dancing with a black skeleton.

IN FRONT of the fireplace was a nervous cane and about two hundred pounds of womanhood making the cane nervous. She stood with her back to the fireplace and jabbed the cane's tip into the easy chair facing her.

"Kidd? Sit here. Leave us, Scott. Well, Kidd? Am I paying you to loaf? Come in and set, damnit!"

I came in and "set." I brushed her cane away from my eyes and told her, "Slip your girdle and relax, sis. And save your braying four your flunkies. And if that one-handed crutch comes near my eyes one more time I'll make you eat it—so help me!"

She threw back her head and roared.

She had a lot of mouth with which to do it. The face around the mouth was a network of sags, puckers and wrinkles that over sixty years of hard living had beaten into it. Tears of mirth oozed from her tiny green eyes and the heft of her quaked violently.

The heft of her, I might add, was squeezed into a blue work shirt and blue levis. Her white hair was wrapped in a red bandanna about five feet and ten inches above the black-polished toenails peeping out from the straps of leather sandals.

This cunning little eyeful, from the agency biography I studied when they euchered me on this case, had once been known as California's Golden Girl, a favorite in Barbary Coast honkytonks around the time of the earthquake. It was around then, also, that she married about two million dollars worth of raw gold, the late Stanley Willis Chips.

Now her laughter dribbled into words.

"I guess I asked for that, Kidd. I feel ornery as a hungry cat this morning. Where's the dirty skunk?"

"You mean Finlay J. Teller?"

"Who else? That's who your agency sent you down to find, isn't it?"

"Lady, I've only been in town two hours."

"It's a small town, Kidd."

I said, "No town is that small—and this one happens to include around thirty thousand citizens. Besides, half a dozen states—not to mention our Uncle Samuel—have been after the guy for a long, long time. In the two hours I've been around I've taken most of the obvious steps—but you don't think a talented lamster like Finlay J. Teller is going to be netted by obvious steps, do you?"

"You're being paid to do the thinking," she said dryly.

"Fine! I've asked some questions and heard some answers and done some thinking—and that brings me to your daughter."

The cane slashed air.

"Leave Toni out of it, Kidd."

"I want to ask her about Teller."

"I don't want you to ask her about Teller."

I said, "Your daughter's the last lead I've got."

The cane thumped to the fireplace's stone apron as the old woman leaned forward on it.

"Then skip it," she said. "Forget the entire thing. I'll phone your agency and tell them to drop it."

She was issuing an ultimatum. Those sags, puckers and wrinkles had solidified into a mask of stubborness.

I argued, "Lady, the guy merely walked off with a hundred thousand dollars worth

of your gold cutlery. Don't you want it back?"

"Not that badly."

The agency wasn't going to like this. The agency had handled this same job a year ago and muffed—and they didn't like that. It's a big outfit. It's big enough for a man in Chicago to look at a map of the United States and say, "This joker the Frisco office sent down to Pacific City flubbed a job. Who is he?" And there would be someone to tell him, "That's that jerk Kidd we always get complaints about. He makes it a point to step on corns." And the first guy would say, "When let's stop wasting his time." And the Frisco office would hand me a pink slip and a helpless shrug and I wouldn't like that one little bit on account it was a hard enough job to land in the first place. Who else would hire an ex-M. P. first sergeant with my temperament?

IT WAS a simple enough case on the surface. A year ago this Finlay J. Teller had sidled into Pacific City with a pitch about being a big New York art impressario. He latched onto the Chips household by the simple expedient of pretending to see in Toni Chips' daubs the unmistakable signs of genius. He told them—suavely, no doubt—he would exhibit her stuff in a 57th Street gallery in Manhattan.

In exchange for his verbal rhapsodies he got two weeks' room and board at the Chips mansion—not to mention several private peeks at the Chips Collection, an accumulation of dishware the late Stanley Willis Chips had fashioned from solid gold for reasons known only to the late Stanley Willis Chips.

It came to a head a few days before Christmas when the ingratiating Finlay J. Teller vanished—along with the Chips Collection.

Whereupon Henrietta hollered copper. The boys in blue fumbled it, so she tried the agency. The agency refumbled it and there it lay until almost a year later— this very day, to be precise.

What happened to revive the issue was one of those cockeyed incidents that leads pompous idiots to prate of "truth" and "fiction." It was a newsphoto: an ordinary group picture in the rotogravure section of this morning's *Times*. The caption said it was the annual Christmas Ball of the Pacific City Art League—and then it went on to list thirty names to match thirty simpering faces.

There was, however, a thirty-first face: a dark, mustached man wearing horn-rimmed glasses and grinning into the camera over two bare shoulders that emerged from two strapless evening gawns.

Finlay J. Teller!

I told mine hostess, "Before you kick me out, will you at least listen to what I've done for your dough up to here?"

"I'll listen."

"I went to the *Times* building first, thought the man who took the picture might give me a steer. I learned their photog, a character named George Whitehead, hadn't reported for work yet.

"His assistant, an ex-cow waddy named Jerry Hart, told me Whitehead returned from Mountain Peak Ranch about ten last night and went right into the darkroom with the plates he'd exposed at the Art League brawl. Fifteen minutes later, Whitehead stormed out of the darkroom. He was muttering about a Mr. Strobe at the frolic who, he accused, had ruined his plates. Whitehead, I may add, was carrying a slight load. The guy seems to be a lush. You know any Mr. Strobe?"

"No. Go on."

"Whitehead still seemed my best bet. A man who takes a picture usually swaps talk with his subjects. He lives in the Beach Hill Hotel. His landlady, a Mrs. Shermer, told me he hadn't even mussed his bed last night. She didn't know any Mr. Strobe either, but she vaguely remembers Teller from a year ago. She repeated Whitehead was a consistant toper and suggested bars.

"I tried about a dozen bars. Whitehead had been in some of 'em, but he'd been drinking, not talking. Nobody in the bars ever heard of a Mr. Strobe. A lot of people remembered Teller—but from last year. And then they remember him mainly in the company of your daughter. You say something?"

"No. Keep talking."

"There's a coffee house—the College Daze. A giggling blonde waitress there, name of Ethel, said Whitehead dropped in there around midnight for some strawberry pie and coffee. Aside from being a lush, Whitehead also seems to be soft on stacked

blondes—and this Giggles qualifies easy.

"He told her he was shortly going to require several assistants to help count his dough on account the end of the rainbow was in sight—and how would she like to help manufacture a couple of dozen little Whiteheads? She giggled him back into the night—and there the trail of Whitehead ends.

"I spent half an hour on the phone. Two calls got me no answers, but twenty-seven calls got me twenty-seven *No's*. Twenty-seven people whose faces are in that picture this morning can't remember seeing Finlay J. Teller at Mountain Peak Ranch last night.

"So what's left? Looking at this picture —" I unfolded my copy of the *Times* to the rotogravure page and fingered the picture — "we see Teller standing behind two strapless gowns and contents. The nearest contents—" I fingered the only unsmiling countenance in the picture, a solemn faced brunette—"has been identified for me as Toni Chips. So that's what's left. She knew the guy from last year. Last night he was close enough to bite off her left ear by leaning forward a little. It's a cinch they spoke—"

The cane pointed at my eyes and quivered.

"No!"

I pushed the cane aside. It returned to my eyes. I pushed it aside again. Henrietta Chips flicked some bark off a redwood log in the fireplace with it. She started it back toward my eyes once more and I rose half out of my seat.

She sent the cane spinning across the library. It smashed through a window and carried most of the glass with it.

She waddled to the other easy chair flanking the fireplace and settled her bulk into it and nailed her eyes to mine.

"What do you know about Toni, Kidd?"

"Very little."

"You hear anybody speak about her?"

I hesitated and she cackled mirthlessly.

"It's all over your face. They *all* talk about her." She waved at the walls. "What do you think of her paintings?"

I thought of my job with the agency and forced a shaky: "Well—"

"Don't be polite to *me*, Kidd!"

"They're a little over my head," I temporized.

"Hell, Kidd, why don't you say it? You've seen better looking stuff in garbage cans. But you'd think—looking at the stuff —that she'd be pretty sophisticated, wouldn't you? You'd think she'd know her way around the block alone, wouldn't you?"

"She's in her thirties, isn't she?"

"Mentally she's more like thirteen. She's about as sophisticated as your left foot, Kidd."

"Okay," I said. "Finlay J. Teller took her for a ride."

"Will you forget your wise-guy chatter for a minute? Finlay J. Teller, the louse, had that kid so wild, crazy in love with him I thought she was going to die when he walked out. If I'd have known where to find him I'd have crawled to him on my hands and knees, told him he could keep the Chips Collection and I'd add a million in hard cash to it—if he'd come back and act like he was wild, crazy in love with her!"

"What would you do if I located him now?"

"Kiss him on both cheeks and hand him the Croix de Guerre. That was a year ago, Kidd. Toni's torch finally went out. All I want out of that dirty louse now is a hundred thousand dollars worth of gold—and him behind bars."

I said, "If her torch, as you so quaintly put it, is out—what harm is there in my talking with her?"

"I don't want her to go through that all over again."

"Suppose I handle it diplomatically?"

"You?"

"I'd just talk about last night and see if she brings him up. If she doesn't, I'll leave her alone and do it with my feet—go from door to door with the picture and questions. The only trouble with that is he could be gone before I reached his door."

"Well—"

"Listen, Mrs. Chips. Why should I do anything to antagonize you? You're paying for this and you're entitled to have it played your way. If I foul it, a word from you would finish me with the agency—which would finish me with *any* national organization. I can't afford that kind of risk."

The green eyes narrowed at me.

"You certainly soften fast for such a hard little bantam!"

"I'm showing you how diplomatic I can be." I grinned at her.

She couldn't help grinning back. It leaked through her tight lips and spread to her eyes. "Okay, Kidd. You win. She's doing a landscape somewhere around Mountain Peak Ranch. Be easy with her."

"Sure."

"And Kidd—"

"Yes?"

"I mean *real* easy. I wouldn't want to have to hire another detective to go looking for you!"

That was a thought. I carried it out of the library and met Scott, the butler, coming in. He was carrying my hat, a pained expression—and Mrs. Chips' cane.

SKIP the weather and scenery. Get one of those brochures the California Chamber of Commerce used to put out—and is now trying to soft-pedal on account too many citizens from other states are trying to live near Rita Hayworth—if you want to learn about the scenery between Pacific City and twelve miles up the winding Gatos highway to Mountain Peak Ranch.

Most towns have one—a roadhouse where the elite can undo their bustles and make noises without interruption. Mountain Peak Ranch was far enough off the beaten track to serve.

I walked through a dining room where a white-jacketed waiter was spreading silverware, into a bar where a florid blond man was talking confidentially with the bartender.

They broke it up as I entered. The blond man spoke loudly, "You positive you didn't see him, Fred?"

"There was a big crowd here last night, Captain Svenson."

Captain Svenson nodded and moved to the door with a cursory glance at me. In the doorway he called back, "Fred, in case he shows—"

"I'll get right on the phone, Captain."

The captain gave me another swift glance before he left.

The bartender was a greyed, angular man. He wore silver-rimmed glasses, a deep tan, a gold tooth, one normal eye and one that was a sort of icy blue. He watched me until my elbow was on the bar across from him.

"What'll it be, mister?"

I looked into his friendlier blue eye and said, "Make it a Scotch highball, Fred."

Without moving, he asked, "Something about my face interest you, mister?"

"Your glass eye," I nodded. "Do you sleep with it over or under the covers?"

Both eyes became equally frigid.

"Is that supposed to be a funny gag, mister?"

"That," I told him carefully, "is supposed to be any damn thing you like. Now pour my Scotch. Make it pinch bottle. And ring up the full amount."

The guy commenced shaking. He opened his mouth—but no words came out. His face turned pink.

"Take it easy, Fred," I soothed. "An old man like you—you practically got one foot in the grave already. You get excited, a couple of arteries are liable to explode."

Someone behind me asked smoothly, "Anything wrong, Fred?"

The barkeep opened his mouth again, but still no words came out. His face grew redder.

I turned around and scowled at the pleasant-faced man behind me.

"If anything is wrong," I asked this new character, "is there anything *you* intend doing about it?"

"I may," he smiled pleasantly. "I'm Johnny Rayis."

"So what?"

"I own Mountain Peak Ranch."

"Then how about seeing to it that I get the Scotch I ordered from this thief?"

From behind me came a choked "What?"

I turned and placed both hands on the bar and leaned my weight forward on them.

"You heard me! We always knew Finlay J. Teller had a shill planted here." I aimed my forefinger at the glass eye. "And you're it!"

The bartender was past indignation. His frenzy finally found his voice. It jittered out between rage and tears:

"Tell him, Johnny! I didn't even *see* Teller last night—wasn't I just tellin' Captain Svenson? Aint that a fact, Johnny? Who is this guy? So help me, I'll—"

He raised a fungo bat from behind the bar. I reached under my lapel. Johnny Rayis slammed into me, pinning my hand against the butt of my Colt. He yelled over his shoulder, "Snap out of it, Fred! Can't you see the man just wanted to needle an answer out of you? Put the bat down!"

"Johnny—"

"Put it down, Fred!"

The bat slowly descended. Rayis stepped back from me. I pulled out my hand and worked the fingers.

"What the hell you made of?" I asked the roadhouse owner. "Cement?"

Fred said, "Johnny—"

"I can't risk my help getting shot," Rayis said pleasantly. "They're too hard to keep these days."

Fred said, "Johnny—"

"You," I told Fred's good eye, "better pour my Scotch!"

"Pour his Scotch," Rayis told the barkeep. "Make it two and bring 'em to the veranda."

Rayis put his fingers on my arm. I shrugged them off and we walked out to the veranda which was sort of an extension of the dance floor.

The veranda looked down over Pacific City and about sixty miles of coastline—but let the Chamber of Commerce tell you about that.

Fred brought two Scotch highballs and an expression for me that was a silent curse.

"I don't think Fred likes me," I told Rayis.

Rayis smiled wryly. "Does anybody?"

"Me," I told him. "But let's talk about Teller."

Rayis shrugged. Even his shrug was graceful. There was a lot of cat in the man's easy motion. His dark hair was full of the untamed curls that bring out the itch in female fingers. His smile was as easy as his movements. He had it on a hair trigger. His body, when he slammed against me, had felt like a tree trunk.

"What can I say about Teller?" he shrugged. "I hardly knew the man."

"How about last night?"

"I noticed him briefly around the time Whitehead took the pictures. We swapped nods and the next time I looked around he was gone. He was probably driving by and detoured to drop in for old time's sake."

"Probably," I sneered.

Rayis glanced at me sharply, then smiled and shook his head.

"It won't work on me, Mr.—"

"Mister's fine," I grinned at him. I drained my glass and got to my feet. "Thanks for the Scotch. Now you can tell me where to find Toni Chips. She's supposed to be landscaping around here."

Rayis frowned thoughtfully into his Scotch.

"There's something you can tell me, Mr. Mister. Then I'll take you to Toni."

"I want to see her alone."

He wore a very thin smile.

"I wouldn't push that nastiness too far, Mr. Mister."

"You better not try to push my nastiness any distance at all, Laughing Boy. Where is she?"

His smile was a little drawn at the edges. He pointed downhill. "She's in a little clearing beyond that stand of redwoods. Will you answer a question?"

"Maybe."

"It's about Teller. I know he's on the shady side because the law was around asking about him this time last year—and they've started in again since he mugged into Whitehead's picture. He always struck me as a very ordinary joe. A little on the dangerous side, maybe. What makes him so important?"

"That Captain Svenson the law around here?"

"He's captain of Pacific City's detectives."

"How does he apply to Mountain Peak Ranch?"

"We're inside the city limits."

I leaned forward confidentially. "Well, keep this under your pretty curls, Johnny. What everybody wants to find out is if Teller finally switched to Calvert."

CHAPTER TWO

Good-bye, Miss Chips

I FOLLOWING a narrow footpath from the veranda to the redwoods. Halfway through the trees I began to hear a dog howl. It was a long, drawn-out howl that went with the picture of a solitary wolf baying at the moon.

The dog turned out to resemble a wolf at that. He was fastened to a small sapling by a leash and the leash was strained taut as he howled his urge to make for distant points.

A lithe brunette was waving a blue-tipped paint brush at him and crying, "Killer, be quiet! What's gotten into you?"

I said, "Maybe he's an art critic."

She swung startled eyes the color and

shape of almonds on me. She wore, as her mother had worn, a blue work shirt and levis. An orange bandanna did things to her raven-black hair. She read my mind with those almond eyes for a few breathless seconds, then turned them to the canvas on the easel at the edge of the clearing.

Mainly, it resembled what lay beyond the clearing. The view slid down over the swaying tips of redwoods, rolled over diminishing hill crests the color of mustard, flared out over the sprawling cluster of doll houses that was Pacific City, skipped across the narrow, winding strip of butter that separated America from the Pacific, passed a handful of toy boats rolling in an invisible surf and then grew into a dazzling blue ball that swelled and rose to the massive curve of horizon.

What distinguished the canvas from the view was a huge arm rising from the pigment ocean with a dozen struggling fishermen clutched in its fist.

Toni Chips was saying something to me, but Killer's howls smothered her words. She leaned over, slipped his leash. He became a brown blur streaking downhill through the brush. She told me, "Go ahead. Laugh."

"Why should I laugh? I like it."

"You're lying."

"Am I?"

"I want to know what you really think of it."

"Okay. I was lying. I think it stinks. I don't understand why you louse up a perfectly good landscape with symbolism. That's what I—"

What I did then was reel back from the slash of her paint brush against my sheek.

She stood as if she was carved from ivory—except where her nostrils flared and her lips that were scarlet daubs against the pallor of her almost gaunt cheeks trembled.

"You pig!" she breathed.

She raised the paint brush across her left shoulder as if to backhand me with it, and I stepped in to teach her the rudiments of polite behaviour.

I forgot the lesson.

Somehow she was between my arms and wrapped around me like a vine around a college tower and her lips were burning into mine and her tears were streaming down my cheeks and the litheness of her was filling me with ideas utterly foreign to any of the rudiments of polite behaviour.

After about a century of this, she unwrapped herself and smiled up at me through the wet.

"I don't know why I do these things. I asked you for an honest opinion and you gave it to me. I was hurt, then grateful. Do you think I'm too . . . impulsive?"

"Perish the thought!" I murmured, reaching for her again, but she eluded me with a breathless giggle.

The dog was articluate again—but in a different vein. Instead of that prolonged howl, he was yapping peremptory barks. He stood stiff-legged about halfway down the hill and yapped. We ignored him.

"Who are you?" Toni Chips smiled. It was a slightly lopsided smile, but nice. "You're such a—a *cocky* person, so determined looking."

"Me?" I said, resisting an urge to grab her again. "I'm just a guy looking for another guy. I'm about two minutes old."

"You're sweet."

"Just honest," I conceded, reaching for more.

She evaded my sinister clutches and gasped, "Killer wants us to see what he found."

"Later. This surrealism is commencing to grow on me."

"You haven't even told me your name."

"Kidd. With two *D*'s."

"I'm Toni—with an *I*."

"Let's face it, Toni. It's in the cards. Let's become real old friends all of a sudden."

"Who's this man you're looking for?"

"A jerk out of your past, Toni. The guy who lifted your mama's goldware. Finlay J. Teller."

THAT ENDED the beautiful music. She turned into a block of ice. I thought of her mother's warning and saw my job take wings.

"Who?" She whispered.

It was on the fire now, so to speak. I dragged out the rotogravure shot, pointed to her strapless evening gown and the mustache grinning over her bare shoulder.

She fainted.

I gaped down at her. I gaped at Killer who was evidently becoming annoyed at the futility of his barks. I gaped at the canvas on the easel, then up the hill to the

stand of redwoods. They continued to stand.

I loosened the belt of her levis and began massaging her wrists. After a while she stirred. I watched her eyes roll into focus, fill with ideas—then drain empty until they were dark pits.

The fat, as I mentioned, being on the fire—what was there to lose?

I said, "You may as well come across, Toni. I want him. Sooner or later I'm going to find him."

"Yes," she said dully. "I know you will. I have a feeling."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"What did he tell you last night?"

"I didn't see him last night." She turned those empty eyes on me. "Leave me alone, please. I can't help you. I don't know anything. You're a detective, aren't you?"

"There are several schools of thought regarding that. Fasten your belt, Toni, and relax. I haven't eaten anybody in a week."

She fastened her belt, but when she rose to her feet she was as taut as a violin string. She gripped my arm with fingers that left five purple marks on my arm for two days.

"I'm going back to Mountain Peak. Get Killer and bring him there. I'll talk to you there."

She didn't wait for my reply. She simply whirled and began running. I watched until the redwoods swallowed her, and then I started downhill after the barking dog.

He was possessed by his own ideas. When I got within a yard of his leash he spun around and became a brown blur again. He dashed into a sort of ravine with a swift-moving stream at the bottom. He stopped there to face me with a new series of peremptory yaps.

I was almost on top of him when he lurched back and continued along the ravine bottom in the general direction of Pacific City. It became a tortuous scramble over rocks and boulders and through brambles and low-hanging braches, with a few unexpected excursions into icy wet.

Then I came around a corner of cliff and nearly toppled over Killer's tense back.

I walked slowly past him and gaped at the Thing twisted over a cluster of boulders in the swift water.

I gaped three hundred yards up where the Thing had left the Gatos Highway which winds past Mountain Peak Ranch. I duly noted the three raw gashes in the rock of the cliffside where this Thing that had been a Chevrolet coupe had struck before wrapping itself around the boulders at the bottom.

It took me about five minutes of wallowing in the cold wet before I was able to wedge my head under a jagged edge of metal and stare into a lifeless blue eye. I noted a wisp of dirty blond hair, a bony nose and a hand floating loosely where the water pulled at it.

It took me another five minutes to locate the steering shaft and pry the registration loose.

Killer regarded me intelligently when I came up to him. I patted his smooth head. He licked my palm.

"Nice detecting, pal," I told him. "Let's scramble back."

He came along quietly.

ONE-EYED Fred scowled that Johnny Rayis was in the back room. This turned out to be beyond the billiard room, a room housing about two dozen slot machines. An elderly gaffer was poking hand tools into the open back of one of them when we entered. Johnny Rayis' attention shifted to me.

"I see you found Toni," he smiled, nodding at Killer.

"Now I'm looking for George Whitehead," I told him.

"George left around nine-thirty last night. After getting his pictures. Why don't you try the paper?"

"Did. He's a dark-haired, dark-eyed guy, isn't he?"

The repairman looked up from behind the one-armed bandit.

"George? Naw! You're thinkin' of someone else, mister. I've knowed George since he was a kid. Blond and blue eyed."

I handed the soggy registration to Johnny Rayis and watched his dark eyes widen with questions.

"You'll find him at the foot of the ravine that runs along your road, Johnny. Someone beat him to death and shoved him over the edge in a Chevvie coupe. Better call the cops."

I didn't wait for his reaction. I returned to the bar with Killer and asked Fred where Toni was.

"Over there."

"Over there" looked empty. Just empty tables between the curtained booths that bordered the dance floor and the view beyond.

"You better get a new eye, Fred," I told the barkeep.

"You better get *two* of 'em!" he scowled at me. "In that last booth."

I walked Killer toward the booth and he broke away from me. He darted through the drawn curtain and began howling like a dog gone mad.

I brushed the curtain aside and found Toni Chips alone in the booth. She was slashing at her right wrist with a broken piece of highball glass.

Her left wrist was already gushing scarlet. . . .

Never mind all the details. She started to struggle when my fingers clamped around her right arm and I tried prying the sliver of glass from her fingers. Then her eyes gazed through two inches of space into my eyes and the struggle drained out of her. The glass dropped to the table. I wedged a bullet against the severed vein, half an inch from where it was cut. It had to be that close because beyond that the vein ran into her palm. I wrapped my tie around the bullet against the vein and wedged my ball-point pen under the tie on the back of her wrist and twisted the pen around until the tightening tie pressed the bullet deep into the vein and the blood pouring from her wrist dwindled to a thin trickle, and finally stopped pouring.

I wrapped the loose end of my tie around the pen, holding it in place. I glanced at my watch. It was two-thirty. I felt for my pen, realized where it was and looked up at Johnny Rayis staring down at us whitely.

"Gimme a pen," I snapped at him. "And a card. And some bandage. Did you send for an ambulance?"

He nodded and fished a pen and a folder of matches from his pockets.

I tore off the match cover, scribbled *2:30* on it and wedged it under the tie. Fred, the barkeep, shoved a roll of gauze into my hand. I wrapped some of it around Toni's right wrist. The blood was only seeping a little there.

She moaned a little. She sat with most of her weight on me. Her head was on my shoulder.

"I won't let them kill me!" she murmured. "I won't! I won't! I—" Her eyes roamed about wildly, came to rest on mine. She snuggled against me and whispered, "Don't let them. Please!"

"Delirious," Rayis whispered. "What did you write on that card?"

"The time."

"Why?" the bartender asked.

I told him a tourniquet had to be loosened once every twenty minutes to prevent gangrene. He asked me where I learned about first aid. I told him I'd been a Boy Scout. He asked me why I thought she did it. I told him to ask her. He couldn't ask her because she was out by now. The bandage and tourniquet kept me from her pulses, but I could listen to her heart.

"She's a strange girl," Rayis said. "Impulsive as the dickens."

I didn't have to answer that. A small army of stretcher bearers, interne, cops and what nots gathered around the booth and things settled down to pandemonium.

IT WAS after four when Captain Frank Svenson shoved my papers back across a veranda table and said, "Why doesn't she leave these things to us instead of dragging in outside talent?"

Toni Chips was long gone in the ambulance. George Whitehead had been untangled from inside his Chevvie coupe. The Pacific City homicide detail had been alert enough to recognize that George had been dead before going over the cliff. It was a simple enough conclusion. The failure of several hunks of George Whitehead to bleed after becoming hunks indicated the bruise in his skull had finished him before parts of his Chevvie began whittling him into hunks.

They couldn't determine whether he had been going uphill or downhill when he left the road. They didn't know why anyone should go to such trouble over him. He was just another guy named George. He took pictures—until he fell out of the Big Picture.

Captain Svenson was the fleshy blond man I had seen talking to Fred earlier. His grey eyes were too small. His lips were too loose and there was too much gold in his mouth.

"*We're* after Teller," he protested, "along with every other force in the coun-

try. They got readers out on him from half a dozen states. Why's she have to bring you in?"

He favored me with a loose scowl.

"You're a pretty fresh punk for the spot you're on."

"I'm on a spot?"

"You've been asking around town all day about George. Then you happen to be the guy who finds him." He accented the word *happen.*

"That puts me on a spot?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I'll spend tomorrow asking around town about you and see if the charm works twice."

A thick forefinger trembled across the table at me.

"Listen, you—"

"You fellows mind if I sit in?"

That was Johnny Rayis easing his smile into the dialogue.

Svenson waved at a vacant chair.

"Siddown, Johnny. This little monkey—"

"I know," Rayis grinned. "He makes it a point to get under your skin. But he probably saved Toni's life." The grin faded into a sober nod. "Thanks, guy. She's one of my friends."

"Who's the other?"

His grin returned.

"I told you it won't work on me, Mr." he glanced at my credentials on the table—Kidd."

Svenson asked, "Johnny, did you ask around if any of your help saw George come back here last night?"

"Nobody at the Ranch saw him, Frank. At least that's what they tell me—and I certainly didn't see him."

"Good enough," Svenson nodded.

"Why?" I put in.

Svenson looked irritated. Rayis looked amused.

"Why?" I asked again. "You taking his word on account he pays off for those slot machines in back?"

"Johnny doesn't pay off," Svenson growled.

"It's just among us girls," I said, and winked at him.

"I tell you Johnny doesn't pay off!" Svenson repeated, turning crimson.

"Why not?" I shrugged. "He makes enough to 'em to afford a little cream off the top. They're in open violation of all the local laws. You strike me as a simple kind of cop—but not that simple."

Rayis put cautioning fingers on Svenson's bristling arm. "Let me put it like this, Kidd. People are going to gamble—if not here, then in Monterey County, or maybe Nevada. My machines let some of it get back to the public. The officials would simply rather have people play it clean with me then see outsiders come in with coin blackjacks."

"If it's as simple as that, why's he laying square eggs?" I asked, jerking my chin at Captain Svenson who was slowly ripening like a tomato.

"I was wrong, Kidd," Rayis breathed, completely losing his smile. "It's beginning to work. Lay off."

"He's threatening me," I told Svenson.

"That makes two of us!" the scarlet-faced detective muttered thickly. "Lay off!"

"Sure," I said, rising. "Does that end the inquisition?"

"After I hear your alibi for last night—around midnight."

"I was home in bed. In San Francisco."

"Can you prove it?"

"In Frisco."

"Stick around until that's official."

I made as if to return to my seat and Svenson roared, "Not here! In town. Get back to town and stop bothering people with questions—and *lay off!* Beat it!"

I did.

I DROVE to the county hospital and ran into Henrietta Chips in the lobby. She was coming out of the elevator, leaning heavily on her cane. She seemed twenty years older now, but her green eyes rammed into me like spikes.

"*You!*" she spat.

"How's Toni?"

"You snake!"

"Thanks. Will she pull through?"

The cane rose and leaned against my chest. We stood like that while everyone else in the lobby froze and gaped.

"You're through!" she croaked. "I wired your agency to throw you out, you bungling oaf! If they don't, I'll have 'em up on criminal charges!"

"Thanks again. How's Toni?"

The cane dug into my chest. "She's none

of your business, d'you understand? Keep away from her." The cane jabbed a little. "Can you hear that all right? Keep away from her!"

I said, "You're asking too much, mom. You're talking of the girl I might learn to love."

The cane rammed me back off balance. It descended to the tiled floor with a *thump*. It continued to thump against tiles as the old dragon sailed majestically past me and out of the hospital.

A snickering flunky in white lost his sense of humor when I cocked an eye at him. I walked over to the wide-eyed nurse at the desk and asked her, "How's Toni Chips doing?"

She remained wide-eyed.

I said, "That was my necktie, bullet and fountain pen on her wrist. If her condition is a state secret, at least I want my pen back."

She said, "Miss Chips is all right. Since the transfusion, she's been doing nicely. Are you really going to marry her?"

"You heard the old witch. She had me fired. I've got to eat, don't I? Is there any chance of swapping language with the light of my life?"

The nurse giggled. "Miss Chips is conscious, but she won't talk to anyone, not even the doctor or her mother. Do you really want your pen back now?"

"Make it the tie. I'll have to wear something when we visit Mountain Peak Ranch this evening."

"We?" She was a compact brunette with large hazel eyes, an intelligent smile and no visible Hollywoodish affectations. The smile dimpled her cheeks now. "This evening?"

"You'll be off by nine, won't you?"

"Yes. But—"

"Nine, then. I'll pick you up in front of the hospital. I'll be the Buick with the dented left fender. Save yourself for me, honey."

At the swinging doors I remembered something and returned to where she sat in a semi-daze.

"Just a detail," I told her. "I'm Kidd. Two *D's*."

"I'm Charlotte," she breathed. "Two *T's*."

We shook hands warmly. This time I got out of the hospital.

Jerry Hart put a Graphlex and a rag down on his workbench and yelled something at me. I shook my head. He closed the door, muffling the roar of the Pacific City *Times* presses.

"Heard you was fired," he yelled. He grinned and lowered his voice. "Anyhow, that's what I heard."

"That's a fast grapevine."

"It's a small town. What you gonna do now?"

"Exactly what I've been doing. Ask you some more questions."

He shook his head. "Ain't gonna get you nowhere, Mr. Kidd. You asked me all your questions this mornin'. Then Cap'n Svenson was around before, askin' 'em all over again."

"The big difference, Jerry, is that this morning we didn't know Whitehead was dead. Frankly, that doesn't make too much difference, unless Whitehead's death had something to do with how Teller sneaked into that picture last night. Mainly, I want to dig into that picture."

Jerry nodded and rolled a cigarette. He was a wiry little man with a ranch pedigree that his voice and manner and clothes advertised. He wore tight levis which emphasized his legs. He wore high-heeled riding boots under the levis' cuffs. His skin was on the leathery side and he always seemed to be looking at some object a mile behind your head.

"George was my buddy," he drawled. "I'll help all I can."

"Fine. Boiled down, George came back here at ten last night, spent fifteen minutes in the darkroom with the Mountain Peak pictures, then came out growling about a Strobe who ruined a picture. How could this Strobe guy ruin a pic, Jerry?"

"Easy. All he hadda do was take the plate outta the holder an' expose it."

"Okay. Let's assume Strobe was some joker at the party who did just that. How did the picture get in this morning's *Times* anyhow?"

"Hey! I never thought of that! Maybe George had more'n one plate."

"Then why all the fuss about Strobe? One was all that George needed. Wasn't it?"

Jerry nodded thoughtfully.

I said, "Is there any way we can check on how Strobe did ruin that plate?"

IT DIDN'T take long. Jerry found it in the darkroom trash bin. He raised the crumpled square of celluloid to the red bulb which illuminated the darkroom.

"It's overexposed all right," he muttered softly.

I suggested, "Let's find the plate George used—the one that got in this morning's paper."

Jerry spent five minutes prowling the darkroom, then five more prowling the drying room and workroom and filing cabinets. He spread his palms helplessly.

"It beats me, Mr. Kidd."

"Could George have faked the picture?"

"Sure—but not in fifteen minutes, not a pic with thirty people in it."

"Thirty-one."

"That makes it harder. He didn't have time."

"And he didn't have time to return to the ranch and snap another. He didn't leave Pacific City until midnight—and Mountain Peak closes at midnight." Jerry lit his hand-rolled fag and we studied each other through a cloud of smoke. I said, "Suppose you were on that spot, Jerry? Your one shot was ruined and you had to do something about it on account the thirty Art League members are related to important advertisers in this town and they might be miffed if their brawl didn't hit the rotogravure. What would you do about it?"

Jerry pondered this while I went around studying the prints tacked to the walls. Most of them were gag pictures. *Time* workers in weird poses. There were some interesting nudes, and the picture that seemed to have been Whitehead's pride and joy, a shot of two sedans forming a tent in the air as his camera caught them in the midst of a head-on collision. When I next looked at Jerry he was grinning broadly.

"I don't know, Mr. Kidd. What I'm thinkin' is kinda chancey—but a newsphoto don't show too much detail an' a guy might get away with it."

"With what?"

"I'll show you."

We went through the roaring press room, along an office corridor and into the *Times* library. We had the place to ourselves. He dragged a massive cloth-bound volume from among dozens of similar volumes on one of several similarly stocked shelves and brought it to a reading stand under a harsh, green-shaded light. The volume was labelled: December—1946.

They say nothing is as dead as yesterday's newspaper—yet the copy of the Pacific City *Times* dated the seventeenth of December, 1946, in that volume contained one spark of life.

In the rotogravure section of that issue I found myself staring at the grinning mustache of Finlay J. Teller over Toni Chips' bare shoulder. I matched my copy of this morning's *Times* to its year-old counterpart.

Face for face, it was the same picture. Even the caption—except for the date—was duplicated.

"That's what George did," Jerry murmured over my shoulder. "Maybe it warn't so chancey at that. Their clothes would be different and they'd have been standin' in different p o s i t i o n s—but the picture's smudged enough not to notice the clothes and they'd been drinkin' an' wouldn't recall exactly how they'd been standin'."

He went on talking, but I was deep in my own mind registering the fact that Finlay J. Teller hadn't reappeared after a year's absence after all. And I was trying to match that fact against George Whitehead's death and Toni Chips' attempted suicide. I vaguely noticed other pictures on that year-old rotogravure page: a shot of President Truman shaking hands with Secretary Marshall, a wedding portrait, a picture of a concrete mixer against a background of trees where they were laying the Gatos Highway, a photo of a fishing sloop towing a forty-ton Basker Shark into Monterey.

I forced myself to think of Whitehead and how his death could be related to his substitution of a year-old picture in this morning's *Times*—and that brought me to the elusive Mr. Strobe.

I said, "Jerry, about this Strobe guy—"

I looked over my shoulder then—into blackness.

There was no pain. I simply glanced over my shoulder and the world vanished. I didn't see Jerry. I didn't see the shelves of cloth-bound volumes. I didn't even see the green-shaded bulb overhead. All I can recall is turning from the rotogravure page.

The next thing I recall is feeling hot. I mean it became scorching hot.

My eyes opened on bright glare. They

blinked shut again as tears flooded them. I was coughing. I seemed to have been coughing for hours. I became aware of sizzling noises very close to me and realized it was the perspiration steaming off my body almost as fast as it poured to my skin. A louder crackling noise was gnawing through the glare in which I was enveloped.

I tried to rise. My head rose into streamers of choking black smoke. I dropped to the hot floor again.

There was a thin layer of breathable air there. I gulped it hungrily, tried to stifle my mounting panic, tried to orient myself in this world of flames.

Chunks of burning wood dropped to the floor and scattered stinging sparks. The floor itself began steaming and buckling as fingers of flame crawled across it toward me.

I have no recollection of wrapping my jacket around my head and crawling along that floor.

I do have a vague memory of my groping hand descending on a face. I mean I knew at once it was a face from the soft lips bending to hard teeth and a nose digging into my palm.

It became unbearable then. There was nothing I could do, no place I could go, too much smoke in my lungs, too much sting in my eyes, far too much heat all through me.

I recall struggling to my feet, pushing my head up into that swirl of thick smoke to end it quickly.

That's the last memory I have—standing up.

MY NEXT memory was gaping up into the tiny eyes of Captain Frank Svenson. His eyes swam out of focus and I heard him tell someone, "He's snapping out of it, Doc. How about the other one?"

An unfamiliar voice said, "Offhand, I would say he'd been killed before the fire started, Captain. A rabbit punch, you might say, a rabbit punch with a blunt instrument. This one would have been dead also had the blow been half an inch to the right."

"Could they get conked like that in falls, Doc?" Svenson's voice prodded.

"That's unlikely. One yes. But two of them knocking themselves out in falls by striking their heads in practically the same way is highly improbable."

I became aware of numbness around my face and a sharp pain on the back of my head. I tried to sit up. Someone's hand kept me down. I followed the hand's arm up to a kindly, elderly face.

"I'm okay," I told the face.

"Better wait till we're certain. The ambulance will be here in a few minutes. You have a concussion and superficial burns. I'll have you X-rayed at the hospital. I'm Dr. Noslow."

I tried to brush his hand away, but I couldn't muster enough strength to agitate a finger. I looked around—and lost interest in rising for a moment.

The man on the sidewalk alongside of me was practically a hunk of roasted meat in trousers. The trousers were tight levis that curved outwardly at the knees and came down to high-heeled cowboy boots.

I became sick.

After a while Dr. Noslow was telling me, "You're a lucky fellow, Kidd. Evidently you recovered consciousness in time to wrap your jacket around your head." He indicated the heap of burned and soaking wet rags that lay on the pavement to my right. "Probably saved your life. You remained conscious long enough to get within a yard of the door. That was when the boys started pouring water into the library. You stumbled right into the stream. A few more seconds—"

"Doc," Captain Svenson's voice cut in, "you say a rabbit punch killed Hart before the fire. How about Kidd—could he have gotten his in a fall?"

"Possibly, although it would be impossible to prove one way or the other. If he fell, whatever his head struck is gone by now."

I followed the doctor's gaze across the street to what remained of the *Times* building. What remained, to be precise, were the dripping, smoke-blackened presses rising amid several tons of smoking, dripping rubble. Pieces of fire apparatus stood around the roped-off street. Hoses snaked from hydrants to the edge of the smoking ruin. Axe-bearing firemen stood grouped around in clusters, their raincoats gleaming with wet. Inside the ropes stood uniformed policemen and beyond them a mob of gaping citizens.

I brought my fingers to the ache on my head and touched bandage. I tried to sit up

again. My chest came against Captain Svenson's shoe which pushed me back down.

"I don't want an ambulance," I told his tiny eyes. "I've got things to do."

"You an' me both," he growled. "If it ain't the ambulance, it's jail."

I gaped up at him and he nodded soberly at the remains of Jerry Hart.

"Hospital or gow, Kidd. We're holdin' you on suspicion."

"Make it the hospital," I said. "I feel fractures breaking out all over me."

"Don't worry about your health, Kidd," Sverson leered. "We're gonna watch it very careful from here on."

"This won't hurt," Doctor Noslow said, pressing a needle into my arm.

It didn't.

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Strobe

I AWOKE in a hospital room. I lay on a very white bed and stared at a very white ceiling surrounded by very white walls. There was a white table bearing a pitcher and water glass. There was a window full of night.

Near the door a young patrolman in uniform sat. He wore red hair, several million freckles and solemn blue eyes which were casually studying me.

"What's the scoop?" a hoarse voice asked him—mine.

He extracted a yellow oblong from his pocket and tossed it at me. I ripped open the envelope and read the wire:

ASSIGNMENT CANCELLED RETURN FRISCO IMMEDIATLY EXPLAIN FUMBLING

SHAW

I asked the cop, "Can I send a reply to this?"

"No."

"Can I talk to a lawyer?"

"Not until the captain says you can."

"How about a nurse? I feel fractures compounding all over me."

A flicker of mirth crossed his freckles.

"No fractures. They X-rayed you five hours ago. All you've got are some burns and a slight bump where you fell."

"I didn't fall. I was felled."

"That's something you'll have to convince the D. A." He shrugged.

"That's something you flunkies'll have to prove," I told him.

"Not me," he said. "All I do is to see you stay on that bed until my relief."

"And that's all you're going to do, hey?"

"That's right."

I closed my eyes, but ideas kept me awake. I opened them again and chatted with the cop. He wasn't averse to light chatter. His name was Bob Heller and he's been on the force a year. Before that he'd been an M. P. in the Pacific. We swapped G. I. anecdotes and then it came out that before the war his ambition had been photography. That was still his ambition—although it had narrowed down to police photography.

"Camera boys haven't been too popular around Pacific City lately," I said.

"Ain't it the truth," he murmured.

A half-formed idea entered what I wistfully call my brain. I nursed it along a while, then said, "Listen, Bob—" we were "Bob" and "Kidd" by now—"how's about humoring a condemned man with a sort of word game? It has a little to do with photography."

"As long as you play it from that bed."

"Sure. I'll say a word. You answer with the first word that comes to your head connected with photography. Okay?"

He grinned broadly.

"I've been word associationed before. Go ahead."

"Negative—" I said.

"Hypo," he said.

"Plate—"

"Holder."

"Exposure—"

"Meter."

"Black—"

"Light."

"Stop—"

"Opening."

"Strobe—"

"Olite—*hey! Wasn't there a Mister Strobe—*"

"Never mind that," I said to him. "What's an olite?"

"Not olite. Strobolite. It's a lighting device that stops fast action on a negative. They photograph bullets in flight with it. It's an electronics amplifier which—"

I cut in, "Not like that, Bob. Give it to

me very slowly in words of one syllable."

"Well, a strobolite will give you innumerable lumens of light for the space of a ten-thousandth of a second."

"Is that good?"

"Sure. All a photographer has to do is leave his lens open at the smallest stop—for depth and detail—and trigger the strobolite. It's so fast you can hardly see it blink."

"Do news photogs use 'em?"

"Sometimes."

"How about George Whitehead?"

"Naw! I knew George. The *Times* wouldn't lay out the kind of dough a strobolite costs. George was strictly a flashbulb man."

"Thanks, Bob."

"Sure."

I pondered this awhile. Whitehead had complained of a strobe ruining his plate—and the plate, as Jerry Hart found it, had been overexposed. Whitehead, also, had told the giggling waitress that he was shortly going to find the end of the rainbow. This was after Whitehead had substituted last year's picture for his ruined plate. And it was that picture which caused Toni Chips to slice her wrists and then plead, "Don't let them kill me!" And it was in finding that picture that someone came up behind Jerry Hart and me, killed Jerry, almost killed me—then set fire to the *Times* library.

I put these facts together in different combinations, added other little facts, juggled the whole deal one way and another—until a cohesive picture began to form, a pattern that would provide a sound motive for killing Whitehead and Hart and trying to kill Kidd and setting fire to the *Times* library. It explained as well why Toni Chips attempted suicide—and, most important of all to me, it indicated where I might find Finlay J. Teller and a hundred thousand dollars worth of gold tableware.

But there were blank spaces in the picture, and I couldn't fill them with my back on a hospital cot.

I said, "Bob—"

"Yeah, Kidd?"

"I feel this bandage slipping. You want to take a look at it?"

"No, Kidd. I want to stay where I am and I want you to stay in that bed."

He was grinning at me.

I told him, "You don't have to be so damned suspicious. All I want to do is wrap you up in my sheets and get out of here."

"I know," he said.

I rolled over and went to sleep.

THE WINDOW was full of daylight when they awoke me. Captain Svenson stood glowering down at me over the glowing tip of his cigar. Doctor Noslow stood at his side. Behind them stood two thicknecks who looked as if they'd be more comfortable in uniforms than civvies. A dark-haired patrolman stood guard at the door and near him stood the breathless nurse of the reception desk with whom I was supposed to have gone Mountain Peak Ranching.

They were all looking at me.

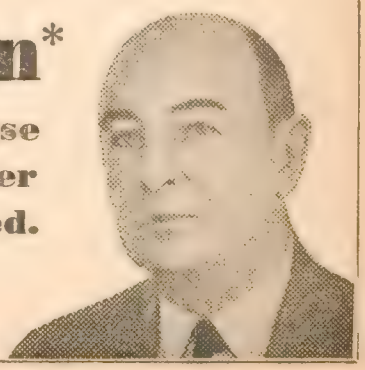
"I want a lawyer," I said.

The cigar in Captain Svenson's mouth bobbed. "Later, Kidd. Right now, all I want from you is a statement. Murphy—"

One of the plainclothes men stepped forward, opening a shorthand pad and finger-

Timothy P. Sexton*

has switched to Calvert because Calvert makes a smoother Old Fashioned.



*of 707 People's State Bank, Indianapolis, Ind.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City

ing a pencil. He poised it over the pad.

"Let's have the lies, Kidd," Svenson growled. "Or you can save us a lot of trouble and tell us why you killed Jerry Hart."

"I want to write it myself," I said.

Svenson transferred Murphy's pad and pencil to my hands.

I wrote, *Johnny Rayis doesn't pay off because of a picture. Turn me loose, sucker!*

I tore the sheet out of the pad and handed it to Svenson and watched his cheeks turn brick red and remain brick red.

"You wise punk!" he breathed. He tore the page in half, then into quarters, then into eighths and finally stuffed the pieces in his pocket.

"Let's face it," I said. "You have no facts. The evidence is up in smoke along with the Times building. All you can hold me on is suspicion—and after two more days in this ward you couldn't even hold me on that."

He forced his tiny eyes away from me and up to his plainclothes men.

"I guess that's how it is," he said thickly.

They kept staring at his face which remained brick red.

The eyes returned to me. "Okay, Kidd. That's how it is. But stick in town. You hear that? Stick in town!"

He didn't wait for a reply. He took his plainclothes men and the uniformed guard and his burning cheeks out of that ward.

Doctor Noslow fingered my pulse. "You can leave any time, Mr. Kidd."

"How about now?"

"Miss Rogers will take you through the formalities."

He left and I grinned at the nurse. "May I have the next dance?"

She had acquired that dazed expression again.

"Will you tell me what you wrote on that pad?"

"Don't worry your pretty head about it. It boils down to there has to be a reason for a camera. Pictures. If a cop overlooks normal graft, particularly a loose-lipped character like Svenson, there's got to be a reason—some kind of squeeze. I assumed he was being squeezed. Get it?"

"No."

"Pictures can be a squeeze—if they're pictures of something you don't want other people to know about. I simply gambled on it and turned up an ace. You saw the clown's face. I touched him where he was raw. Now do you get it?"

She shook her head mutely.

I said, "I'll put it this way. Suppose you wanted to slip your girdle and have an uninhibited time—where would you go? I mean around Pacific City."

"Mountain Peak Ranch, I suppose," she supposed.

"Now you're cooking!" I told her. "That's the story in a nutshell. Is Toni Chips still in the hospital?"

"No."

"She can wait. First things first. My clothes, for instance."

These turned out to be a pile of damp, scorched rags. They sent my baggage over from the hotel and I donned my spares and returned the baggage to the hotel. There was another wire waiting for me there.

YOU ARE FIRED REPEAT FIRED RETURN FRISCO IMMEDIATELY
SHAW

To which I sent a reply:

YOU ARE NUTS REPEAT NUTS WANT LIST ALL GOLD TURNED IN GOVERNMENT WEST COAST 1947 AND LATEST INCOME TAX REPORTS HENRIETTA CHIPS AND FRANK SVENSON AND JOHN RAYIS AND GEORGE WHITEHEAD ALL OF PACIFIC CITY IMMEDIATELY REPEAT QUICK LIKE ANYTHING
KIDD

I sent it collect.

I spent an hour convincing my stomach my throat hadn't been cut; then I prettied myself and drove out to the Chips mansion where Scott, the butler, told me Mrs. Chips had no wish to see me.

From behind him the old dragon's voice seconded the motion: "Get out of here, Kidd! If your agency hasn't already discharged you I'll make 'em sorry they didn't. Get away from here now before I have you arrested for cluttering up my doorway!"

I yelled through the butler. "Keep horsing around with me and I'll tell the world about Toni Chips and a picture."

The nice thing about a charm is that it keeps working. Scott lurched to one side

and Henrietta Chips stood in his place. Her face looked a hundred years old now. Her two hundred pounds seemed to have dwindled to a hundred and fifty.

"What do you know about a picture?" she croaked.

I said, "That's not the point. The point is what do *you* know about a picture?"

She said, "Come with me." She turned without waiting for my reply and waddled down the corridor. I followed her thumping cane while Scott closed the door behind me and followed at five paces, right flank, rear. We moved like that up a curving flight of stairs and along another corridor and then through a door into a room filled mostly by a four-poster bed.

IN THE bed lay Toni Chips. She lay on her back with her bandaged wrists outside the covers. Her face wore a tense, tortured expression as her eyes crawled steadily from side to side in eccentric zigbags. She was panting hoarsely and uttering low moans which might have been word—but I could recognize no words.

Beyond the bed sat a square-faced, squarely built nurse with arms the size of my thighs.

"Go ahead, Kidd!" Henrietta Chips croaked bitterly. "Ask her clever questions about a picture."

I looked into the wrinkled face, then moved alongside Toni's tortured face and said, "It's all over now, Toni. They won't kill you. You'll be all right now."

She just lay there without a sign of having heard.

I said, "I know about the picture now, Toni. It's going to be all right, do you hear me?"

I could have been ectoplasm for all the attention she paid me.

The nurse said, "That's enough!" Her voice matched her arms—a female baritone.

I followed Henrietta back to the library where I told her, "I wasn't trying to be clever. It's just that I've been close enough to an answer to rate homicidal attention." I sketched in some background, explained Finlay J. Teller's picture in the paper, told her how Whitehead's "Mr. Strobe" turned my mind to pictures that didn't appear in the *Times* and how the magic word had touched a button in Frank Svenson before opening her door to me—the word being picture. And that set her going.

"It meant nothing special to me," she said emptily. "It just happens to be one of the things Toni screams when she grows hysterical. The psychiatrist Doctor Homback sent down told me I should keep track of all the words Toni uses, that the words and their meanings to her would help cure her—her dementia Praecox."

The sags, puckers and wrinkles began to quiver like mad. Deep sobs wracked her body and bubbled through her lips.

The purple nude was still dancing with the black skeleton over the mantel. Neither of them seemed to be enjoying it. None of the animals staring glassily down from the walls seemed to be enjoying what they saw either.

After a while I looked back at Henrietta Chips. Her face had composed itself again.

"I see a way of digging to the bottom of the whole deal," I told her quietly. "But I can't do it alone."

She whispered, "How will it affect Toni?"

"I don't know. It's a chance we have to take. The next question is what chance does Toni stand if we don't get to the bottom of what's on her mind?"

She croaked, "Your blundering started this. If your blundering makes her condition permanent—"

"You're threatening me?"

"I'm telling you I'd spend my last cent hiring thugs to track you down and destroy you."

"That's a chance I'll have to take," I said.

We traded a hard stare, then she nodded slowly.

"It will stand like that, then. Now what help do you need?"

"You ought to know most of the important wives in Pacific City."

She dismissed this with a wry shrug.

"All of them. What of it?"

"I want you to sit down and phone them. I'll tell you what to say. And then, depending on their reactions, I'll tell you what to tell them. I want mainly attractive young wives who happen to be wedded to gaffers running out of vitamins."

"What will that prove?"

"If we get the right reactions, it will prove my hunch—right down to why Toni attempted suicide."

The green eyes widened a little.

"All right, Kidd. What shall I say?"

"What sparked the reaction in you—only worded differently. Start off by saying, quote, I've just seen that Mountain Peak picture of you—*you* know the one I mean!, unquote. If that gets a positive reaction, invite the lady over to talk about it at five this afternoon. Okay?"

The green eyes grew even wider. She sat at the phone, studied a list of numbers, dialed one, then barked into the mouthpiece, "Clara? Henrietta. I just saw that Mountain Peak picture of you. *You* know the one I mean!"

My ear alongside the dragon's caught the lazy reply: "You mean the Women's Bowling Association party, Henny? I didn't look my best, really. That blue satin gown I wore was too—"

I shook my head at Henrietta and she terminated the conversation. Four calls later the response was: "You *what?* He *dared* show it to you?" Hysteria poured from the instrument while I made a circle of my thumb and forefinger in front of Henrietta's eyes.

She nodded to me, then spoke into the mouthpiece: "I want to speak to you about it at five this afternoon, Jean. At my house. Be here."

She pronged the receiver and gaped at me. "Kidd! That was the mayor's wife!"

"It's a small world, I always say," I grinned at her. "The mayor's wife should be good enough for now."

IT WAS four-thirty by the time I finished my theorizing across Captain Frank Svenson's desk in City Hall. He sat there rubbing his damp palms together and frowning at me.

"I'll be damned!" he muttered. "Well I'll be damned!"

"You'll have to admit most of it holds together," I said.

"Most of it," he nodded. "But—"

"But what?"

"You can't prove it. You can't prove any of it: Whitehead, Hart—or even Teller."

"I don't know about Teller," I said. "I've a hunch there, too. But it'll take big help."

Svenson looked worried.

"You know how it is, Kidd. I make a move and it doesn't jell, I'm in the soup for sure. Martha ain't what you might call a reasonable woman—and I want to go on just like we've been goin' on, see what I mean?"

Martha was his wife.

"You don't have to make a move where anybody will know the difference," I said.

He nodded vigorously.

"*That,* I'll buy!"

"It's a question of digging into the Gatos Highway, finding out exactly what part of it was being laid last December Seventeenth and then ripping into it—and in a couple of hours."

"That was in 1946, Kidd."

"That's the December Seventeenth I mean."

Svenson didn't look happy. But he nodded slowly and reached for his phone.

I left him deeply engaged in conversation with the state highway commissioner.

* * *

The Mayor's wife would have made a nice watchfob. On the other hand, she was probably an interesting wife. A small, slender, poised bundle of red-headed dynamite, the dynamite commenced to explode the instant she entered the library and saw me with Lady Chips.

Her grey eyes blazed as she advanced on Henrietta behind a salvo of low, bitter words: "Henrietta Chips! *What* is this man doing here? *What* did you mean by—"

"Shut up, Jean!" Henrietta said sharply. "Shut up and sit down!"

Jean didn't want to shut up and sit down. She wanted to spit in Henrietta's eye and kick her shins and sink her white cuspids in my throat.

The oddly matched women faced each other in a challenging silence; then Jean shrugged and scowled, "This better be good!" She swaggered to a divan and slammed herself down onto it.

Henrietta nodded to me.

I said, "Whether or not it's good is up to you. Two—possibly three—people have been murdered up to here. A hundred thousand dollars worth of gold is missing. I happen to be a private operative down here to find some answers. I've found some. I need a few more—and you can supply them. For instance, Johnny Rayis has been blackmailing you, hasn't he?"

The mayor's wife snorted.

"That's not good enough, Mr. Detective!" She rose on her elegant underpinnings and stared coldly at me. "I don't care how many people have been killed or how much gold is missing. All I care to know is whether *you* intend to start blackmailing me."

"Of course not!" I scowled at her.

She flashed me a bright, humorless smile. "That's that. Good-by, Mr. Detective. Good-bye Henny Chips—you rat!"

She was halfway to the door when I murmured, "Unless you consider the fact that I intend to ask your husband the same questions a form of blackmail. . . ."

That stopped her as if I had nailed her shoes to the floor. She gaped at me. She had become a deep thinker in a matter of seconds, this high-pressure little offshoot of Eve. The seconds ran out and she faltered, "Is that all you really want—answers?"

I nodded.

She returned to the divan and settled herself on it again, with her entwined fingers forming a red and white knuckled knot on her lap.

"John Rayis is blackmailing me," she said quietly.

"With what?"

"A picture."

"Want to tell me what's in the picture?"

"No!"

"Well, that's not important," I shrugged. "Where did he take it—and how?"

"In a booth—at the Ranch, I mean." Her hands became disentangled. They fluttered helplessly. "I don't know how. I've been back since and I couldn't tell where he hid his camera. The angle of the picture was from overhead—but overhead the ceiling is nothing but a solid mirror."

"We'll dig into that later," I said. "How much do you pay him?"

"Ten dollars a week."

"He's not going to get rich very soon on that," Henrietta commented drily.

"That's not the point," I told her. "If he's lined up ten suckers, that's a hundred a week—and the chances are that through the years a lot more than ten loving wives have shed their inhibitions amid the drinks and music and privacy of those booths."

THE MORE I thought of it, the smarter ten-dollar weekly bites seemed. A woman wouldn't jeopardize her marital security for that size tab. The husbands wouldn't notice it—not the upper-income-bracket husband Johnny Rayis probably selected as a foil for his bleeding.

"Is that all you want to know?" the mayor's wife asked meekly.

"No," I said. "There's one thing more. Exactly how badly do you want that picture back?"

Her scorn chased the meekness off her face.

"That's a hell of a question!"

"That's a hell of an answer!"

"Of course I want it back!"

"Okay!" I turned to Henrietta and said, "Back to the phone, Watson. The same gag that netted Jean. But this time we want the whole menagerie. Comb all the upper bracket wives from one end of Pacific City to the other and have all the blackmailees here by—" I glanced at my watch, then grinned at her—"by seven tonight."

Henrietta eyed me thoughtfuly.

"Then what, Kidd?"

"We organize a raiding party," I grinned. "Too long has Mountain Peak Ranch corrupted the innocent youth of this fair city. The leading matrons of our fair city—the extra-marital matrons, that is—will take it upon themselves to rid the vicinity of this foul deadfall—"

Red was on her feet and ablaze again. "Are you crazy? Do you think I'd risk my entire future for ten measly—"

"If not you and the other girls," I scowled at her, "then the raiders will be the husbands of our extra-marital matrons!" I pushed my jaw to within inches of her jaw and barked, "You think I'm kidding?"

"But that's preposterous! It's heads you win, tails we lose! Something like that would drag it all into the open. The papers and police—"

"Not my way," I cut in. "Captain Svenson is a charter member of Johnny's picture club—he pays off by not getting paid off—and he's already started the ball rolling for tonight's party. The press will learn exactly what you tell it—and you'll tell it that rumors of curtained booths and illicit gambling and juvenile drinkers at Mountain Peak Ranch drove you simply mad, mad, *mad!* And your loving hubbies will believe whatever they read in the papers. Don't they always?" I turned to Henrietta. "The phone, Watson. Let's thicken the plot."

Henrietta scowled at me.

"I'm no fool, Kidd. You're assuming Toni was being blackmailed also—"

"You talk like a fool, kid!" I snapped at her. "In your own words, it'll take the meaning behind the words she mumbled to help the psychiatrist unscramble her dementia whatsit. Can you tell me a better way of learning what she meant by 'picture' than going over and looking at it? *Get on that phone!*"

She shook her wrinkled face slowly.

"I tell you, Kidd, I don't know whether to kiss you or kill you!"

"I'd rather be killed," I told her. "Now get on that phone."

She waddled to the phone and did things with it and I cocked an impressive finger at the mayor's wife. "You stick around," I scowled at her. "You're the bell-wether. You're gonna help convert the others at seven."

She suddenly giggled.

"I bet you'd be fun in a booth!"

Henrietta spoke from the phone, with her palm over the mouthpiece:

"Alice Pherson, Kidd. Her husband owns Pherson's Department Store!"

"Atta girl, Watson!" I winked at her. "Keep the plot thickening. I'll be back at seven. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Bistro Busters

I WAS back at seven with some answers to some of my wires.

Never mind the meeting in Henrietta's library. It was the wildest, craziest meeting a pants-wearing mortal on this earth ever attended. In the middle of it about half a dozen tearful women sobbed their way out of the house—but there remained forty-three long-suffering veterans of the Mountain Peak booths who listened in grim silence to my golden oratory . . .

At nine, my Buick entered a slot between a Packard and Ford. Nurse Charlotte Rogers and I crossed the gravel bed of the Mountain Peak parking lot and made our way to the veranda and up into the syncopated bedlam.

About ten couples were dancing to jukebox jive. All the booths had drawn curtains. Most of the tables between the booths and dance floor were packed with gabbling, guzzling, giggling guys and gals. More of them crowded the bar behind which one-eyed Fred and two assistants whirled like dervishes.

Colored lights played over the frolic from a slowly spinning globe in the mirrored ceiling.

This was against a background of nearby peaks thrusting toward the star-speckled night. I could mention other items like the cool, scented stuff that filled my lungs and a huge golden moon sailing high through the star points—but let the C. of C. spread its own propaganda.

Johnny Rayis was not in evidence.

Charlotte fingered my arm wistfully.

"We just window-shopping?"

"We buy," I grinned at her, swinging her into the jitterbuggery. Larry Adler had possession of the juke at the moment. Someone with taste had nickelled *Hora Stacatto*. I worked Charlotte across the dance floor, past the bar to where the billiard room broke our clinch as I walked her in.

"Installment buyer!" she hissed.

"I don't want to sweep you off your feet with the full force of my personality. I want you to have time to digest what little you've experienced," I told her, walking her past the characters bowing over the clicking ivory balls and into the slot-machine room where other characters prayerfully fed dimes, quarters and halves to the gimmicked ratchets. I slipped about ten dollars worth of change into her hot little palm and told her, "Winnings, we'll split. Losses, I'll work out of your hide."

Her startled: "Hey!" followed me back into the billiard room.

There was a door beyond the bar. I waited until Fred's back was turned, then slipped through it and found myself in a corridor running from the kitchen to the dining room. There was a stairway in the middle.

A waiter bearing a loaded tray from the kitchen barked, "Where ya goin', Bud?" as I started up the stairs.

"Men's room," I grinned at him.

"That's out around back."

"First I want to see Johnny Rayis," I tried again.

"See Fred."

"I did. He said upstairs."

The waiter sighed and continued toward the dining room, muttering, "I keep tryin'. They can't say I don't keep tryin'!"

The stairs led to another corridor with six closed doors, one at each end, three facing the back of the Ranch and the sixth leading to whatever lay over the dance floor.

This one had a Yale lock. The lock was locked. I tried the knob for give. There was no give.

I began trying skeletons from the ring of forty I carry under my right lapel to balance the bulge made by my Colt under my left lapel. I was about halfway through when I became aware of a brass key a few inches below my left elbow.

Fingers held the key. An arm led to the fingers. Johnny Rayis stood at the other end of the arm.

"Try this," he said quietly. "Beery told me someone came up here looking for me."

"Beery?"

"One of my waiters."

"Oh, yes. He keeps trying. Nobody can say he doesn't keep trying."

"You, too," Johnny Rayis said quietly. "It seems everywhere I've turned the last few days, there you've been—trying."

"Like in the *Times* library?"

"That's what I mean," he said steadily. "You're still trying. There's no point in asking you to get the hell away from that door, is there, Kidd?"

"Not at these prices," I said, plucking the key from his fingers and depositing the skeletons under my right lapel with my right hand and using the hand to pull my Colt out of its nest. With my left hand I keyed open the door, then stepped back, swinging my Colt around. "After you, Johnny."

He wasn't there. He was still behind my back. He was holding something hard that rammed into my back.

"Uh-uh. After you, Kidd."

I strained around to peer down behind my shoulder. He pulled the object back a little for me to see better: a small black automatic. His hand slid under my left arm.

"Let's have it, Kidd."

I put my Colt in his hand and watched them both retreat under my arm. The automatic jabbed my spine.

"Go in, Kidd."

I entered the darkness that lay beyond the door. A *click* flooded the place with light as the door closed behind the roadhouse owner. My Colt was wedged in his belt. He gestured with his automatic. "Keep trying, Kidd."

IT WAS sort of a loft that must have covered most of the dance floor. Aside from several black boxes on the floor at the far end and a curtained alcove in one corner the place was bare.

"Darkroom?" I asked Rayis, indicating the alcove.

"That's a good try, Kidd," he said expressionlessly. "Try some more."

The black box in the center of the loft held a slowly grinding motor—to turn the globe that splashed colored lights over the dancers below. I went over to one of the boxes spaced along the edge of the loft and Rayis followed me silently and watched me raise a section of loose flooring alongside this box.

I found myself gaping down at a greyed gaffer who was nibbling on one end of a straight pretzel. A heavy-set brunette with pink flesh bulging from the edges of a too-tight gown was nibbling at the other end of the pretzel.

When their lips met, the gaffer waxed passionate a la John Gilbert in the old silents. He was spreading kisses all over her cheeks, her ear, her neck.

Her head was thrown back and a mouthful of teeth that were too white to be entirely natural was open wide, as if in laughter—but I could hear no laughter.

On the other hand, she was gazing through four feet of space into my eyes, but she didn't seem to see me. I knew about that also. She was gazing at her own reflection in the mirrored ceiling.

"What a little privacy in a trap like this will do to inhibitions!" I told Rayis.

He shrugged, then scowled.

"What put you onto it, Kidd?"

"George Whitehead's talk about a strobe."

"I was afraid of that."

I rested my hand on the black box. "This Mr. Strobe, Johnny?"

"It's you who's trying, Kidd."

I lifted the black box and saw it was a camera. Wires ran from it. Some ran to what looked like holes in the loft's floor about where the corners of the booth would

be. By stooping, I spotted large bulbs inside close-fitting reflectors built into the ceiling corners of the booth.

Other wires ran to a larger black box with a pebbled surface. A strip of silvery metal read: *Danger—High Voltage!* There was a tiny red light and several knobs, dials and meters.

"This has to be Mr. Strobe," I told Rayis.

"Have it your way," he shrugged.

A lone wire ran from it to a toggle switch in a bakelite setting. I flicked the switch and caught the barest ghost of a hint of a flicker from the bulbs in the corners of the booth.

The couple whose picture I'd just snapped didn't seem to notice the untold lumens that had illuminated them for a ten thousandth of a second. They were starting on another pretzel.

I walked slowly around the loft and noticed a camera and strobolite over each booth—and even one over the middle of the dance floor alongside the revolving globe. The bulbs here fitted into glass knobs in the ceiling which formed a circular design around the globe. The lens of this camera was shaped like half a ball and it fitted into another knob in the design.

"Fish-eye lense?" I asked Rayis.

"What's the difference?" he shrugged.

I studied the pairs of heads gliding a few feet below my feet and then probed the solemn face of Pacific City's collector of extra-marital skeletons. "How come you triggered this gadget when Whitehead snapped the Art League picture, Johnny?"

"What's the difference?" he asked again.

"I'd just like to know. For instance, did you give Whitehead the satisfaction of learning his hunch about the strobolite was right before you clobbered him?"

"It makes no difference, Kidd," Rayis spoke quietly. "Whitehead was like you. He tried too hard."

I glanced down at my feet, then up at the man I had once considered a "nice guy."

"How hard is too hard, Johnny?"

The muzzle of his automatic shifted a little.

"That you're about to find out, Kidd. Turn around now. Walk to that wall and stand facing it."

"No," I said.

His eyes widened a trifle. He shrugged.

"It makes no difference, Kidd. This loft is soundproof.

"And you can consider me bulletproof, Johnny. Take a look at the tableau under your feet, Johnny. Go on—look!"

His eyes flicked down. They returned to me. They became enormous. They snapped down again. They stayed down.

I might have tried for his automatic then, but one of the reasons I have remained alive this long is that I have never tried for a gun in another man's hand—ever.

I said, "See what I mean, Johnny?"

He saw what I meant, but I doubt if he heard what I said. His eyes remained glued to the spectacle taking place under our feet.

The heart of the spectacle was Henrietta Chips in the middle of the dance floor, waving her cane imperiously at this and that like a general picking out targets to be shelled. You couldn't hear the words that augmented her cane's gestures, but you could certainly see the results.

The dancers, the drinkers, the citizens being prodded from the booths—even that couple who had been making pretzel nibbling a community enterprise—were obviously angry and reluctant to be herded to the doors and exits. But where Henrietta's cane pointed, there a half a dozen or more grim matrons sprang to her bidding.

Maybe it was their expressions, maybe their bearing and clothes—which smacked of the big houses on the hill. Maybe the words they used, maybe the items they waved menacingly. Some of them had gone all out a la Carrie Nation and brought hatchets and axes. The mayor's dynamic little wife bore a riding crop. Others packed such trivia as rolling pins, canes and axe handles.

Whatever it was—expressions, appearance, words or weapons—the booths emptied, the dance floor emptied, the employees stood backed against the walls.

I don't know what touched off the explosion. I glimpsed my old one-eyed friend Fred as he advanced on Henrietta Chips with a poised fungo bat. And then I saw him vanish under a surge of weapons and women.

Henrietta's cane indicated the huge mirror behind the bar—and it disintegrated into a million slivers of flying glass. Her

cane waved toward the booths—and the curtains vanished in a wild, ripping twinkling. The cane aimed at a row of bottles behind the bar. They become transformed into a heap of glass rubble.

In a way it was like watching a movie without a soundtrack. All I could hear was the hoarse, erratic breathing of Johnny Rayis—and possibly the wheels grinding against wheels in his head.

An axe edge bit through the paneling of the loft's locked door.

A muscle twitched in Johnny's cheek. His dazed eyes swung to mine.

"Kidd," he breathed, "you did this?"

"I encouraged the worms to turn," I admitted.

Bewilderment muddied his eyes. "It's crazy, Kidd. Suppose I get time—five-ten years for extortion—what happens to them? Some of 'em have kids. They're all married to bluenoses—and some of 'em are in pictures that'd make French postcards look like Sunday-school valentines. . . ."

"It's more than extortion, Johnny," I said quietly. "Remember Whitehead and Jerry Hart?"

A wave of the automatic dismissed Whitehead and Hart.

"Stop clowning, Kidd!"

"Okay," I shrugged. "There's no way to link you to Whitehead and Hart. That was on the cuff for me anyhow. Mainly, I want Teller and the Chips Collection."

Johnny's eyes rolled to the door where the axe blade was showing for the third time.

"Kidd," he breathed, "can you control 'em?"

"For Teller and the gold I'll try," I said.

"Not Teller, Kidd. The gold is something else again. But you have to control 'em."

"You'll have to give 'em the pictures and negatives, Johnny."

"Then what, Kidd?"

"Then it becomes a stalemate, Johnny. They're passing this off as a drive against your slot machines and the curtains on your booths and the minors you serve. You play along and get rid of the machines, curtains and kids—and that's how it'll lay."

"You sure they'll play it like that, Kidd?"

"Pretty sure."

"And you'll stop with the gold?"

"That's right, Johnny."

The door slammed open.

Johnny Rayis circled behind me and jammed his automatic into my spine.

"That's how it better be, Kidd!" he breathed.

BLACKMAIL is always a question of balances. The victim weighs his fear of exposure against his ability to meet the blackmailer's demands. The blackmailer weighs his fear of arrest against his victim's fear of exposure.

It was almost like a problem in mathematics coming to life in that loft at that moment. Never mind the ten seconds it took for the cameras and strobolites and dark-room fittings to become little piles of battered junk—while Johnny Rayis stood backed in a corner with his left arm wrapped lovingly around my neck and his automatic jammed into my back. Basically, it was a question of mathematics, a shift in the balances of fears.

I could feel it in the trembling of his automatic against my spine, see it in the hungry faces of the women staring over

my shoulder at his face. It was as if each little fear he had that one of them might break and expose him as an extortionist was multiplied by the number of his victims facing him—until his total fear was greater than their individual fears and they sensed it and lost all their fear entirely.

"He wants to be reasonable," I told them. "He's willing to turn over the prints and negatives and issue a public statement that as a result of this raid he will hereafter keep the curtains off the booths, remove the slot machines and make certain no more minors are served at the bar."

Jean, the red-headed bundle of fury, aimed her riding crop at me. "How can we trust the dirty rat? How do we know he hasn't extra prints hidden away elsewhere?"

"I haven't!" Johnny croaked over my shoulder. "The whole caboodle's in my safe!"

Henrietta Chips fastened her bitter eyes on mine.

"Do you believe that, Kidd?"

"An hour ago we figured he averaged five hundred a week from the lot of you, but a telegram I got half an hour ago told me his income tax statement had reported only ten thousand dollars income in the first three quarters of 1947. So it really makes no difference whether he has other prints cached. He tries squeezing any of you girls, you know he faces about twenty years in cumulative sentences if you expose him—income tax evasion as well as extortion, and Uncle makes it a point to win such cases. He'll be good." I spoke over my shoulder. "Won't you be good, Johnny?"

The gun steadied against my spine as confidence returned to the bistro-owning blackmailer.

"They play it smooth, I play it smooth," he said. "But you stick with me for now, Kidd. I don't want them getting hysterical. You're my ace."

I felt more like a deuce as the women backed before me and the automatic prodded me toward the door. Once through the door, the weapon prodded me toward the stairs—then began trembling against my spine again as confidence oozed away from Johnny Rayis.

The stairs were jammed solid with silent, staring women. Both ends of the corridor were packed with more women. The office across the corridor held still more—and here the axes had been at work, even to the paneling on the wall that had hidden Johnny's safe.

Most of the forty-three blackmailees were clustered there on the stairs, the corridor and in the office, and their hate for Johnny Rayis was alive and ugly and tangible enough for me to feel without the trembling gun muzzle in my back.

"The combination, Rayis!" Henrietta croaked. "Call it out!"

I glanced over my shoulder at Johnny gazing hungrily at the jam-packed stairway and I could see the scales balancing in his mind; whether those women would buckle and retreat under the threat of his gun, and whether he stood any chance at all of retaining his blackmail grip on these women if he did manage to get away now.

But from the expressions on those women, it would have taken shooting—and that hay-wired the balance. I could read it in the jittering of his automatic against my spine.

He called out the combination in a dull, wooden voice.

There was a sudden shrieking and gabbling in the office.

Henrietta Chips appeared in the doorway with a thick sheaf of glossy prints, and under each print was a black negative.

Johnny's voice crackled in my ear, "That's it, Kidd. They have what they want. Get 'em off those stairs."

Henrietta glanced up from the top print and called out, "Verna!"

A woman on the stairway squealed. Henrietta rolled the top print and negative and they were passed down to the women on the stairway as Henrietta called out the next name: "Jean!"

I spoke over my shoulder, "How about what I want, Johnny—the Chips Collection?"

The automatic became a gimlet in my spine.

"We get out of here first, Kidd. Now!"

"You'll have to shoot me, Johnny. No gold, no go."

Henrietta's voice droned on: "Alice! Ethel May! Anita! Stella! Carol! Iris!"

"It's in Nevada!" Rayis snarled into my ear. "Don't you get it, Kidd? All that held 'em back was the pictures. While you can control 'em, make 'em let us down

the stairs or it'll have to come to shooting—and you don't want shooting any more than I do. Let's go, Kidd!"

I should have listened to him. I should have gone.

Henrietta's voice had been continuing with the roll: "Frieda! Helen! To—*Toni!*" It came out in a wail of sheer horror.

The next instant my head exploded from the impact of her cane. It came down again and set fire to my left temple. It whipped into my skull again and clicked every bone in my body against every other bone.

I began sagging in Johnny's powerful grip. Little men inside my skull were toying with rockets and nuclear fission and shuttling between my ears in a rusty Sherman tank. From a distance of about ten miles Henrietta's voice barely reached my diminishing consciousness: *"I told you I'd kill you, you dirty, rotten snake! If it's the last thing I do, I'll—"*

I never learned what. I scarcely felt her cane splintering on my head and shoulders. I had sagged past the power of Johnny Rayis to hold me up. I had slumped to the floor with my face inches from the sheaf of remaining prints and negatives that Henrietta had dropped.

And the top print was a picture of Toni Chips alone in one of the curtained booths with a man who was unmistakably Finlay J. Teller. And what made this print interesting was the fact that Finlay J. Teller was toppling backward and pulling what seemed to be a knife out of Toni Chips' right hand.

He was pulling the knife—blade first—with his chest!

THE CANE was no longer striking me. I forced my eyes up to see Henrietta Chips struggling in the hands of two other women. Her cane lay in splinters on the floor at my side. I lay at the foot of a tight arch of women who had Johnny Rayis backed against the corridor wall. He was gripping my Colt in his left fist, along with his automatic in his right.

He was shouting hoarsely, "Let me out of here! You have what you want. I can't talk about the pictures without proof, and all it would take is one of you to squeal about me to the Treasury. But you won't—to keep me quiet. And I'll back your raid story—to keep *you* quiet. What more do you want?"

His eyes dropped to me and a dirty grin momentarily erased the uncertainty from his face.

"That's what your *trying* netted, wise guy! Your own client's daughter! Teller was tight and told her he already had a wife back east, and impulsive little Toni stuck a butter knife right into his chest."

"And you ditched the body for her?" I asked from the floor.

Uncertainty tore his grin apart and left his features loose.

"No. No, I didn't say that, Kidd. I took the picture. By the time I got down to the booth they were gone. I don't know how she got him off the Ranch, where she buried him. Maybe she didn't. Maybe he didn't die—I don't know. But that's it, Kidd. Now make 'em let me out of here."

"Let's juggle it a little more, Johnny," I said from the floor. "You blackmailed Toni for the Chips Collection, didn't you?"

He tried to laugh, but the hatred beating against him from that circle of staring eyes forced the laughter back into his throat.

"Okay, okay. I squeezed her for the collection." Rage suddenly whipped into his voice. "I'm keeping the gold, Kidd—you hear that? Talk it over with your client. She presses me for the gold, I'll drop a word where Teller *might* be found—with a knife in his chest and Toni's prints on the hilt! You hear that, Kidd?" The guns in his hands shook like dry leaves in an autumn wind. "I'm getting out of here! Get back, you people—back!"

He advanced a step.

The tightly packed circle of women remained a tightly packed circle of women.

He sucked air through his teeth noisily and backed to the wall again. His voice mounted a steep ladder of panic: "What's the matter with you? Can't you get it through your thick heads? These are guns! They shoot!"

A man's voice sang out from the foot of the stairway: "Kidd? Is Kidd up there? *Tell him that Captain Svenson found the body under the highway!*"

Henrietta Chips moaned, "Oh, my God!" They didn't have to struggle with her any longer. She looked a thousand years old.

"You hear that, Johnny?" I asked softly. "Teller's body. I happened to notice, in the year-old paper that burned with the Times Building when you found Hart and myself

finding answers, that the Gatos Highway was just being laid past this ranch around the time Teller vanished—"

"I tell you it was her!" Rayis croaked hoarsely. "Toni Chips! It's got nothing to do with me! Nothing!"

His jaw hung slack as that man's voice sang out again from the foot of the stairway:

"Kidd?"

"Yo!"

"Captain Svenson says to tell you they dug a bullet out of his skull!"

Johnny's eyes became wild things, trapped birds—probing, darting, skidding about that tightly packed circle of staring eyes.

"That's how it had to be, Johnny," I said quietly. "What other reason could have made you kill Jerry Hart and try to kill me in the *Times* library? What difference would it have made to you whether Whitehead had used a year-old picture or one he had taken sometime at the Art League Ball?

"Unless it was because you lied to me about having seen Teller at the ball. You knew that when I learned it had been a year-old picture I'd remember your lie and probe for a reason for it—and the only reason was that you wanted people to think Teller was still around. That implied you had something to do with Teller not being around—something important enough to drive you to murder.

"So I added that to the missing Chips Collection and Toni's attempted suicide when she learned I was a detective after Teller and she saw his 1946 picture in the 1947 paper. It became tighter when digging into Whitehead led to Strobe and the blackmail angle. Teller's corpse under the highway cinches it."

I went on quietly, watching the dampness glisten in his eyes from the intensity of their glare. "All we need now is for Ballistics to match the slug in Teller's skull to the automatic you're holding. And I'm betting my entire future in this detecting business that they match, Johnny. Which means Toni's butterknife in his chest didn't kill Teller. It means you decided that Teller alive was worthless to you, while Teller dead meant a hundred thousand dollars worth of gold cutlery. How's my *trying*, Johnny?"

The two guns slammed down on me and blasted!

But my arms were around his knees before that. I was halfway to my feet, lifting his knees high in the air and the hot explosions slammed past my ears like twin thunderclaps.

Bits of plaster dribbled down from the ceiling.

Then hands ripped me aside.

It was as if the last veneer of civilization had been stripped from the women as they tore into Johnny Rayis, like a pack of starved wolves closing in on their prey for the kill.

My Colt came slithering out from the forest of shuffling legs. I grabbed it and rose as far as my knees when his automatic blasted. That snapped the spell. The wolves became women again, screaming, squealing, fear-driven creatures who sprawled all over me as I struggled to reach my feet and get a bead on Johnny.

And then, when I'd struggled through the bulk of them and had a clear view of his back as he started diving down the stairway past women who parted before him and gaped at him with naked terror—my hand trembled too much to risk a shot. I could do no more than lurch after my trembling Colt to the head of the stairs.

Just in time to hear two guns blast a one-second duet. In time to see Johnny Rayis turn slowly and try to sit down in space, go tumbling and sprawling—until the bottom landing held him motionless and the automatic skidded away from his stiffly outflung hand.

It skidded to the feet of Captain Frank Svenson whose tiny eyes glittered down at it over the large Positive in his own fist. His eyes shifted to the tiny pool of claret that was Johnny Rayis' left eye. They swung behind him to where his Stetson lay on the floor with two new holes in the peaked crown. They lifted to me at the head of the stairway.

"Anyone hurt up there, Kidd?" he called.

The women behind me shook their heads and pointed to the raw hole in the wood of the floor.

I shook my head at Svenson.

"Got *all* the pictures?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Kidd," he said awkwardly, "I never fig-

(Continued on page 128)

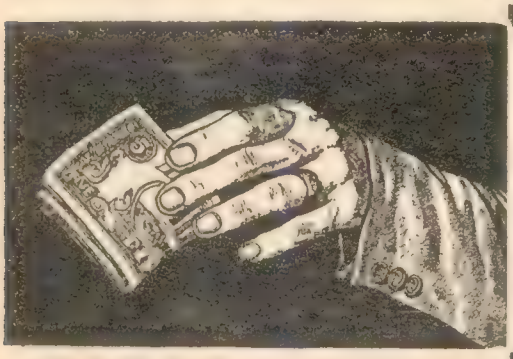
ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON

When William Harrison of Gloucestershire, England, vanished, authorities thought they had enough for a corpus delicti. They picked up Harrison's battered hat and bloody muffler on the road near his home, along with a few other possessions, such as might have fallen out of his pockets in a struggle. And when they also managed to get a murder confession out of one John Perry, Harrison's not-too-bright servant, and a notorious liar, they were positive they had a case. Perry's confession implicated also his mother and brother, and all three were hanged.

Two years later William Harrison came home with a story of having been slugged and kidnaped by highwaymen. His account was rather incoherent and could never be verified—but the fact remained that there he was alive—and the Perrys weren't!

Joe Dehlmar of the Windy City climaxed a career of crime by killing two men—one a policeman—one night, and was himself killed while resisting arrest. Curiously enough, the city which has tolerated more violence and lawlessness than perhaps any other in the world, got its back up about Joe. To keep the police station from being razed by a lynch-hungry mob, police were compelled to mount and hang Joe's body in a window for forty-eight hours—to prove to the excited populace that he was dead!



Champ pickpocket of all time was probably Loopy Jackson, who operated during the turn of the century. Loopy's take ran to a grand a week, partly because he kept a crooked cop on his payroll and used him to set up his victims. Otherwise, too, he had a good batting average—two convictions in a lifetime of crime and a little over a year spent in jail. His operating costs were high, though, and he didn't keep enough of his loot to bury him.

Englishman Morgan, employed at an inn, had for some time kept a systematic and greedy eye on his employer's cash hoard, and when a chance patron of the inn died, he saw his chance. He managed to make the death look like murder, accused his employer, and, with the assistance of a chambermaid, managed to get him hanged. Morgan then took the money, married his accomplice, and set out to live happily ever after.

He did all right a few years. Then, what would have been a humdrum marital quarrel in the lives of most people, sent Mrs. Morgan in a vengeful mood to the police, to whom she confessed the frame. A recheck showed the supposedly murdered man had died of apoplexy without any attendant violence. Both Morgan and his wife died in jail.

That Lovely Lethal Lady!

By FRANK WARD

TO MY LEFT the beach frilled away in an uneven ruffle around the blue throat of the lake. I moved sluggishly in the sun, yawning. After a while I sat up and squinted out toward the point, where the canoe was idling dreamily on the still water. I could see the flash of white against tan, very little white and more tan than was strictly in keeping with a summer resort like Point Collins. A breeze lifted an eddy of loose fine sand and sent it scampering down the beach.

Shading my eyes with my hand, I watched the canoe. The man out there was laughing now, a tall, lean young man with sun-bleached blond hair, narrow shoulders blistered red from the sun, and long, skinny legs. The girl was laughing with him.

The pinpoint of excitement in my belly widened and spread. I glanced at my wrist watch. Eleven-fifteen. The girl in the white bathing suit stood up, rocking the canoe gently. I lighted a cigarette, waving the match slowly until the flame bit into my fingers. Now was the time. I wanted to lie back and close my eyes and think about how it would be when the job was done, but I had to watch. I had to sit there staring out across the lake while she killed him. It seemed so absurd that a man with his money and flair for sports had never learned to swim. Couldn't even waver

Corcoran grunted: "Take his place, bright boy. Cops make better riding company on a trip like this!"

Murder is what they call it when you're sitting on the wrong side of the fence. But the badge in my pocket would make killing the husband of lovely, long-limbed Mavis Bedford another matter: Line of Duty!

along with a clumsy dog-paddle. The canoe was a good quarter-mile out, the water slapping against the fragile shell.

She was doing the rocking deliberately now, and the cigarette snapped and crumbled between my fingers. Her teeth gleamed like fresh ivory in her perfect red mouth. She was having a hell of a good time out there, savoring the moment, her predatory little mind intent on the act, on the future she was going to have with his money, and with me.

I was part of it too. I was most of it. It was my idea, and it was a good enough idea for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars of insurance, and whatever dough he had lying around. Split two ways. But more than the money, I kept thinking about Mavis Bedford. Mike Bedford didn't matter. He wasn't anything to me except an obstacle, and obstacles have a way of getting themselves removed. I didn't envy him, or even dislike him. I even hoped drowning was as easy a way to die as people said.

So I sat there in the warm sun, waiting for her to commit our murder. It had been planned carefully, meticulously, yet with a wide margin for error. He didn't have to die today or tomorrow. All the props we needed were the lake and the canoe and the man who couldn't swim. And we had all that.

I scrambled up suddenly, cursing under my breath. She had turned her head and was looking over her shoulder. Then she flipped easily off the canoe and was swimming toward the rocky point with graceful, effortless strokes. The canoe swung about and followed, the paddle flashing wet and slick. I saw the reason then. A sleek runabout was yawning widely around the point, the *putt-putt* of its motor muffled by distance. Even at that range I could spot the glittering chromed fixtures and polished mahogany of Chief Reddick's private launch. Weakness caught at my knees and I sat down again and wiped my face with my hand. The chief was a character. Quite an important character in my book, because I worked for him. A curious mixture of sixteenth century brutality, overtoned by manners as polished and insincere as those of a court gallant. The launch was chugging around in a loose circle. Reddick would be watching Mavis, wishing to himself that Mike Bedford was elsewhere. That made three of us. Only straight bad luck had brought Reddick around the point in time to keep the water out of Mike Bedford's lungs.

I spat in the sand and got up and slung my beach robe over my shoulders and sloughed through the sand to the wooden steps that climbed steeply up to the cliff top above. There wasn't anything more Mavis and I could do that day. I got my clothes on and drove back to Headquarters.

CRIME in Point Collins was as listless as the climate. We had eight thousand citizens, migratory and otherwise, a fire department that hopefully polished its gear every day during the tourist season, then let it rust all winter, a police department with shiny pants and more swivel chairs than we could fill, ten uniformed cops who dressed like rear-admirals, and a detective squad.

The plainclothes detail was my meat. The sign on my office door said so. It said, Lieutenant Walter Martin, Chief of Detectives, in fresh, black paint. There was a tilted brass plaque on the desk in case you didn't believe the door. There was a large sunny office, with new filing cabinets, a desk slightly smaller than a pool table, and a rug that would show scuff wear in about ten years. I liked that office. I spent a lot of time just sitting in my swivel chair, looking out the window onto Markham Boulevard. Beyond the town, the soft blue of the lake was showing. If I sat there long enough, they'd move me over to another and larger office, with gilt lettering on the door and a padded leather chair. As it was, all I had was an air cushion.

The phone buzzed in its soft, refined way, not too loudly, in case I might be sleeping on the job. I hooked it off the base, said, "Martin, Detective Bureau."

Chief Reddick's baritone said, "Hello, Walter. Everything quiet?"

I said everything was quiet.

"Fine," Reddick purred. "Just fine. Now listen, Walter. I want you to do me a little favor. Won't take you but a moment. Trot over to the bank, old man, and draw out five hundred for me. I've already phoned them but they haven't a messenger handy. Past closing time. I'm out at the club, entertaining some of these damn tourists." He made deprecating sounds into the phone, just so I'd know how much he disliked drinking other people's liquor. "You know how it is. Wanger at the bank will let you have the money without a check. It's all arranged."

I said, "Why, certainly, Chief, delighted," and put the receiver back on its cradle and sat looking at it. Then I looked at my watch. I found my hat and yanked it on viciously and said the usual words in the usual voice and went out. I was walking toward the elevator when Carnes came out of the squad room, with the coat of his Palm Beach suit open, showing the butt of his service revolver, and called, "Lieutenant."

I stopped. "I'm busy, Carnes. Can it wait?"

He shrugged. "Looks like business is perking up. Three guys just took a bank over in Mountain View. We got it on the teletype about fifteen minutes ago, but no one was here to read the damn thing. They killed a bank guard and a teller. Carried Reising submachine guns. They took about eighty grand in cash and bonds, some of them not registered. Mountain View says they were driving a black Cadillac sedan, heading this way."

"In that case," I told him, "the state cops will crowd them off before they get anywhere near here. It's a good two hundred miles away. Why worry about a little thing like that?"

"Suppose they get through?"

"Oh, hell," I said disgustedly. "Put out an alert on the Cadillac, then. Wake up some of the roundsiders we've got on the payroll and have them set up a road block. Make it look good." Reddick would want it to look good. I went back to my office and got my .38/44 Smith & Wesson out of the desk drawer, strapped on a shoulder rig and slid the gun into the spring clip. Then I phoned Reddick and listened to him being annoyed about it.

He told me to do what I had told Carnes to do. With that under my belt I drove over to the bank, picked up the cash and tooled the department car out along the undulating Point road toward the country club. As I drove, I thought about Mavis Bedford, and about her husband and about what a fool a man can make of himself over a woman if she gives him enough reasons. And Mavis had all the reasons I could ever want.

MY FOOT eased down on the accelerator and the big Buick caught it up and poured smoothly ahead, tires humming on the macadam, flipping through the miles. I liked being chief of detectives in Point Collins. We had a nice little setup here, and the rank gave me a fancy car to roar around in and an executive's office to sleep in, and a big shiny gun to carry. But it would be a damn sight better if I were chief of police, with a captain's rank and a captain's salary and the social standing that would bring in a place like the Point.

I drove automatically, letting my mind play with the idea of murdering Mike Bedford for his wife. That was the only way I could get and keep her. That was her way. Get the man you want, but make him work for it. Make your trade, but get the best of the bargain. Give him a taste of what he can have, then put your hand in his face and keep your arm straight and after a while, if he's big enough and dumb enough, he'll crawl through hoops to reach you. He might even kill an unwanted husband for you, and I was big enough and dumb enough for that, too. It made me sick, in a way. Lying there on the beach that morning, waiting for her to dump him into forty feet of water, it hadn't been too bad, because there was nothing I could do about it once the act had begun. Now, with the car flowing smoothly under me and the wind fanning my face, the thought of her put fear and nausea in my stomach. She was no good for me, no good for anyone who stopped to look at her twice, and I knew it, and the knowledge didn't make

the slightest damned difference to me. . . .

The country club jumped suddenly at me over the crest of the road and I was past it and on before I could switch from gas to brakes. The Buick's tires left rubber on the road and the big job fishtailed, slowing. I backed onto the shoulder, swung around and went back, up the curving gravel drive, through the lines of carefully planted pines and the crisp smell of sun-seared grass and the swish of rotating sprayers. Reddick was lounging on the porch. He didn't bother to look at me when I walked up the broad stone steps and approached him. He was talking to Mavis Bedford. He had one hand on her bare arm. Mike Bedford came out of the clubhouse, carrying three highballs and smiling vacantly.

I said, "How do you do, Mrs. Bedford," and made my face politely disinterested. "If you could spare a moment, Chief?"

Reddick said, "Certainly, Lieutenant. I know you folks will excuse me." Mavis nodded. Her dark eyes were amused. Reddick and I went into the clubhouse together, down to the men's locker room. My heart was slamming against my chest. I thought I could smell her perfume in my nostrils. I gave Reddick the money.

"Look," I said seriously, "this Mountain View holdup business may add up to trouble for us, if those boys break through the state lines. It wouldn't look so good in the papers if the chief of police was out playing roulette at a joint that should have been raided years ago, if anything goes wrong."

He was a small man, small and compact and hard from tennis and swimming and gym workouts. He was as tough as a brand new golf ball, and he knew it. I had seen him working, smiling his dreamy smile while the rubber hose writhed like a live thing in his slender hands. He was as tough as they came.

He placed the end of his forefinger against my chest and leaned his weight on it and looked up into my face. I looked back. He had nice, soft, brown eyes, friendly and not at all vicious. He said softly, "Listen to me, Walter. We don't kid each other, you and I. We're all a bunch of smooth operators up here. The citizens like it that way. They like it easy. They like having their speeding tickets fixed and a lot of small favors done for them. We like to do favors for them. We're just public servants, Walter. So you serve them your way and I'll do it mine. But keep your mouth off me, Walter, or you'll get a taste of hot pavement through the soles of those expensive shoes."

He said all this to me as if he were asking me to drop out some afternoon for a swim and a cocktail.

"Fine," I said. We stared at each other for a few seconds more, the way two very hard guys are supposed to do when they have a climax at hand and no place to put it.

Finally he tucked the money in a pinseal billfold, put it in his pocket and patted the soft grey flannel jacket he was wearing. We went outside.

Mike Bedford grinned amiably at us. "How's crime, Lieutenant?" I said crime was not paying very well. He laughed at that one, because he thought he should. Like a well-bred kid trying to please an adult. He was about twenty-four, and he hadn't outgrown the eager stage yet. I wondered how he had ever come by a woman like Mavis. "Sit down and have a

James E. Sorrels*

has switched to Calvert because Calvert makes a lighter highball.

*of 1015 S. Rosemont, Dallas, Texas

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City

drink," he invited. "You know my wife, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. I looked at her. I could feel the flush mounting under my tan, and I knew Reddick was watching me coldly. Mavis smiled an impersonal smile and nodded her head.

"We met on the links a few weeks ago, darling," she murmured. "The Lieutenant made quite an impression. He showed me what was wrong with my . . . game."

I swore at her bitterly under my breath and behind my smile. But I didn't take the drink. She was smoothing her white playsuit over her brown thighs when I went down the steps and walked quickly over to the car and got in, inhaling deep breaths of air that reeked of gasoline and hot seat leather and blistering metal. I put my hands on the wheel and looked at them. They were shaking. I ground the motor savagely into life and let the Buick drive itself back to town.

THAT NIGHT she phoned me. I was standing under the shower, sweating, when the phone rang. I left the water running and went into the living room to get the call.

Her voice was soft and very intimate, and I knew she must be alone. She said a good many things she had said before, in just the right voice and with just the right intonations, but they didn't have the right effect. I listened to her and fumbled with one hand for the bottle on the phone table and poured a drink. It went down fast and landed hard. I poured another, still listening.

She said, "Walter, about this morning. . . ."

I had been doing a lot of thinking about that. "This morning was fine," I told her gruffly. "Just the way it should have been. Man and wife in canoe. Period. Listen, Mavis, we might as well get this ironed out right now. I've had all I can stand of you. More than enough. You're poison, baby. Soft and sweet-smelling and sugar-coated, but still poison to me. From now on in you're Mike's tough luck, and God help him!"

"Walter, you—"

"Forget it. And be damn glad I'm telling you to. It was a swell idea, and it was worth a lot of dough to us both. But it was just the money you were after, not the guy who could help you get it. If Reddick was dumb enough to listen to you, I'd be sitting out on the back door step with the empty milk bottles."

"Walter, you're wrong! I want to see you . . . now . . . alone. . . ."

I got my laugh under control. "No, thanks! I've been through that, too. When all I've got in my hand is a phone I can think, and make it sound like good sense. And all the thinking I've been doing tells me that if we went through with this thing there'd come a time when I'd bore you the way Mike does now. And then some other guy would be digging up ways to get me out of the way. Oh, no! Not for me, Mavis." I filled the glass with my free hand, glanced at it sourly, then put the liquor down my throat.

There was a silence then, such a complete silence that I thought she had hung up on me. Then she said, her voice high and dangerously unsteady, "Walter, you're drunk!"

"Not yet," I growled. "But I will be, and I have been. So drunk with you that I'm not even human when I'm around you. Well, that's over for me. So I'll have a hangover and I won't be able to sleep nights thinking about you, but I'll get over it. And that's the way it's going to be."

"No!" she said, her voice hissing. "Oh, no it isn't, Walter. You'll see. You'll come back. You're just upset because we failed this morning. You can't forget me, Walter. Not after what we've been to each other."

"Put that in a novel, kitten. When I go I don't come back."

I dropped the receiver on the cradle. It bounced off, slammed against the wall, dangling on its cord. I picked it up. I was shaking like a plucked violin string. The phone rang again as soon as the cradle bar was depressed. I let it ring. I took the bottle and fought my way back into the bathroom and turned the shower from warm to hot. I stayed there for half an hour, alternating hot and cold and rye whiskey. When I had finished the bottle I threw it into the living room. It hit the rug and rolled under the sofa.

I went into the bedroom and dropped on the bed and lay there, waiting for the ceiling to make a solid connection with the walls. The phone kept jarring the silence

at intervals. When the phone quit, the door buzzer took over. The room was hot, oppressive. I worked on my will-power until my feet found the floor, then weaved over to the window and hoisted it up and tried the air outside. It was cooler at night, with a hint of Fall. Directly below, in the street, a prowl car was nestled against the curb, its red spot blinking on and off. A cop was standing on the sidewalk, looking up at my window. He had a stubby Browning riot gun under his arm. He waved to me, urgently.

I FOUND a dressing gown and answered the door. Carnes walked in, his eyes reflecting worry, his thin face set.

"We've been trying to get you for the last forty minutes," he said sharply. His pale grey eyes took in the apartment, probing the darkened bedroom. "All hell's going to break loose in this town, Walt. The boys who held up the bank over in Mountain View this afternoon slipped around the road block the state cops set up. They don't know how, but they figure the Cadillac swung up through the hills and cut back to the main highway a few miles farther on."

"Okay." I said. I dressed, dropped some spare shells for the Smith & Wesson in my pocket and followed Carnes outside to the car. The cop with the riot gun said, "This is a lousy deal, Lieutenant. You know who those guys are?"

"The lieutenant's been too busy," Carnes said bitterly. "He hasn't heard."

"Ride that easy, Carnes," I told him. I was sweating again, and my thoughts had fuzzy edges. "Suppose you save the quips and talk business?"

"That's what I've been trying to do. I told you the Caddy got through. Turns out Marty Corcoran was driving. He's got two trigger men with him. We put up that road block late this afternoon, just in case, and it worked. Corcoran tried to crash it, doubled back when he couldn't and holed up in the country clubhouse. Our chief of police is in there with him, at gun point, and so is Mike Bedford and the club staff. We've got the place cordoned, but we don't dare move in. If we do, Corcoran says he'll spray Reddick and Bedford and anyone else in sight."

The prowl car opened up and careened through the town, siren blaring. I leaned my head back against the cushions and tried to turn out one idea that was big enough to stand on its own two feet. From the corner of my eye I could see Carnes sitting tensely on the edge of the seat. I knew he was a good cop, one of the best on the force. He was a medium-sized man, dynamic, running smoothly under pressure, but without the political savvy to move out of the squad room to a private office. He had sandy, rumpled hair and his face was sharp and tight.

I found a cigarette and thought about Marty Corcoran. Every cop who could read knew about Marty. He was wanted in so many states by the F.B.I. that we figured he had quit and headed up into Canada, or taken a long shot on reaching Mexico. His leaning toward small-town banks had been widely publicized, and when he took them he usually killed somebody. I had seen flyers on him. A big, hulking redhead, and as kill-crazy as they come. It was going to be fun taking him.

"What deal's he trying to make?"

"If we go in after him, he swears he'll start a small massacre. And he will. But he'll trade. A new car, plenty of gas—for Bedford and Reddick. He says he'll take them along as far as he has to, then drop them off unharmed."

"The hell he would."

"Maybe, maybe not. He's trigger happy, sure, but a cop-killing would bring him nothing but grief. He's got us where it hurts, though."

The country club was flooded with glaring white light from spots that had been installed and trained on the building. The black Caddy had muzzled into one wall at a fair speed and its shiny radiator and hood had telescoped into a crumpled mass of wreckage. The club itself was a rambling two-story structure surrounded by a sloping lawn on three sides, and with its back flush against the rim of a steep bluff. The nearest shelter on both sides and in front was well out of pistol range, and we didn't have any Thompsons with us. No one had ever thought that Point Collins would have any use for one. We pulled in, got out. The cop with the Browning riot gun stayed near the car. Another cop came over and nodded to me.

"They got a guy on the roof with one of

the Reisings, Lieutenant. We can't get near enough to do any good with the riots. But we sent a guy back to get a high-power rifle."

"Anyone else in there beside Corcoran's boys and the staff and Reddick and Bedford?"

"There was a girl, but she got out before Corcoran took over, sir. She's over there by that tree."

He pointed. I looked past his outstretched forefinger and saw Mavis Bedford leaning against a pine, puffing jerkily on a cigarette. Her face was as white as the evening gown she was wearing.

"Okay," I said. "I'll look around. Stay back and keep those guns quiet until I tell you different." I glanced at Carnes. "Stay here," I ordered. My voice was rough and strained. There was a queer expression on his face, but he simply shrugged and stood aside.

GRAVEL crunched under my shoes, and then I was on the wet night grass and walking toward her. She was hell on wheels, she was poison for me, she was capable of cold-blooded murder—yet I couldn't stay away from her. My hands were clammy and the whiskey in my stomach was a burning sore.

She looked up gravely at me through the gloom. "Walter?" she murmured, so quietly that I had to bend my head to catch the word. Then she smiled slowly, and the smile said that I had come back to her, as she had known I would. It said that she might have to fight a little to keep me, but not very much, not very hard. Maybe the smile was right. I almost forgot that the cops by the prowl car would be watching. I almost forgot the things I had said to her on the phone. I lighted a cigarette and drew deeply on it.

"Skip the light talk, Mrs. Bedford. Your husband's in there with a gun in his back. So is Chief Reddick. If we move in, as we should, they both get it. Not to mention what might happen to the staff. I thought you'd like to know."

"What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "The only thing we can do. Give Corcoran his chance to get away, and pray like hell he'll keep his word."

"And you think he will?"

"I don't know. That's the chance we take. It's the only chance we've got."

"It's . . . too bad you didn't know for sure." Her voice was a whisper now. She leaned her head back against the tree. Her throat gleamed, long and full and smooth. I put my hand up, felt the pulse pounding unsteadily under my hand. After a while she said, "Walter, if you go in there, or even try to, this man Corcoran would kill Mike, wouldn't he?"

"Yes."

"And he'd kill Chief Reddick, too, wouldn't he? And then you'd be chief of police?"

My tongue suddenly began to feel too big for my mouth. I tried to wet my lips. A tiny nervous chuckle was bubbling in her throat. She watched the idea working on me. And it was there, inside me, before I could stop it.

She was right. If we did move in, Mike Bedford and Reddick would stop a clipful of slugs. Then she and I—Mavis Bedford, the girl with the mind for murder, and Lieutenant Walter Martin, the cop with no mind at all—would be sitting right on top of the heap. With no complications, no inquests, no questions asked.

I could move on to the bigger office, the one with the gilt letters on the door and the padded chair and the southern exposure and the captain's rank. I was the only man in line for the promotion. I could even buy myself some cigars with the reward money put up by the banks Corcoran had taken in the past. I could take over completely. Reddick's job and Bedford's wife. And I had always wanted that, from the first time I'd met her, from the first night I'd opened my apartment door and found her standing there, smiling at me with that full ripe mouth.

Now her voice was low and muffled against my coat, telling me these things. Her face was only a white blur in the darkness.

"They'd never find out," she whispered urgently. Her fingers dug into the muscles of my shoulders. "You'd just be doing your duty. And you wouldn't have to go with them. You could stay here, with me, and let the others do it. Please, Walter! Please—for me?"

"Just a minute," I said hoarsely. "It isn't just Reddick or Mike in there. It's maybe eight, ten other people who haven't

got any stake in this at all. I can't—"

She stopped the words with her mouth. "What does that matter? They don't mean anything to us, darling. You've never thought about anyone else when you wanted me. Why should we think about them now?" Then, "I was awfully upset after what you said to me on the phone tonight, Walter. You didn't mean that, really, did you?"

I said, "I don't know what the hell I mean any more, Mavis," and turned and went away from her, walking stiffly, toward the patrol car where Carnes leaned against a fender, smoking his pipe.

"We'll make the deal with Corcoran," I said flatly. "We'll take the chance that he'll give Reddick and the kid a break, Carnes. It's the only thing we can do."

"I was wondering," Carnes said, nodding his head slowly, "just how far you would go for that dame, Walt." His eyes held mine for a long moment. Then he grinned and tapped the pipe against the fender and reached for the door handle. "I'll let Corcoran know."

"Yeah," I said, my throat dry, "you do that."

I DROVE the patrol car around to the side door and pulled up and sat behind the wheel with the heavy-duty Smith & Wesson in my lap, while I waited for Corcoran to come out and get his car. The whole thing felt vaguely unreal to me, as if I were a spectator in the first row of the balcony, watching—not the guy who was going to catch a bellyful of .45 slugs if Corcoran was edgy and thought he was walking into a trap. That was my part of it, the price I was going to pay. Because Carnes had been wrong about me. I licked my lips and got the taste of Mavis Bedford's lipstick, and my hand tightened around the butt of my gun. Corcoran had been given his green light over the public address unit in the car, for all to hear, and he had grasped at the chance because he knew that if he didn't we'd wipe him out sooner or later, regardless of what happened to Reddick or Bedford. He would either walk out, with his pair of hostages, and take the situation at face value, or he would twitch his finger to clear the way and the three of us would go out together. But in either case, the club staff would be out of the picture entirely, and that was the way it had to be.

I cleared my throat harshly and flicked my cigarette out the open window toward the side door of the club. The car was parked a scant ten feet away from that door, with its motor idling. I hoped they wouldn't drag the affair out, because if they did the fine sand in the gas tank would reach the motor ahead of schedule. I wondered what Corcoran would do when that happened, when the car chugged to a halting stop on the highway and he heard the far-off whine of the police sirens behind him. I thought I knew Corcoran's type well enough to gamble on his reactions, and for just a moment I felt sorry that Mike Bedford hadn't taken it the easy way that morning in the lake.

The night was very quiet. A cricket worked industriously somewhere off in the woods surrounding the clearing, and in the marshy expanses at the foot of the bluff a bullfrog made noises like a bass fiddle.

Abruptly the cricket's scolding ceased, and I tensed. The side door had opened

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of Detective Tales, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1947. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Detective Tales, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912 as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given: also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of October, 1947. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 363-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Rev. 7-46.

and Chief Reddick stepped out, his hands at shoulder level. His face was expressionless, but in his eyes a spark of hatred or fear burned savagely. Behind him, a short, wide little man with his hands full of submachine gun prodded him on. Reddick's eyes met mine and I smiled faintly and nodded my head. I knew Corcoran wouldn't make his appearance until his men had cleared the way. The short man with the Reising came over to the right side of the car. "This hadn't better be anything the boss wouldn't like, copper," he said softly.

"How could it be?" I asked. I added, "There's a gun in my lap, cocked, with my finger on the trigger, and the thing's pointed right at your belly. Don't kid yourself that the slug won't go through this door. Just insurance for me. I wouldn't want you guys to get nervous. When Marty comes out, I'll put the gun away."

He stared at me disinterestedly. "Sure," he said. "That's okay by us." He gave Reddick a jab with the muzzle of the Reising. "In, golden boy." Reddick swore murderously and crawled over the front seat into the rear. I kept the .38/44 pointed at the gunman. He lighted a cigarette and ignored me.

"You damn fool!" Reddick snarled. "You think these swine are going to keep their word about letting us go?"

"Shut up," I said wearily.

His reply was cut off by the appearance of Bedford from the club. The situation was the same. The boy's eyes were scared and his face was blotchy and mottled, as if someone had been slapping him around. Behind him another gunner walked, tall and thin and consumptive looking. There was a pause—then Corcoran lounged out of the club and strolled over to the car. He, too, carried a Reising submachine gun, but he wasn't pointing it at anyone.

I said, "Your deal, Corcoran. Take some advice. Let these two go when you reach the Canadian border, if that's the way you're going. Or, by God, we'll follow you clear up to Alaska!"

He laughed, a great booming sound that silenced the bullfrog in the marsh. "Tough!" he said. "A real tough copper! Sure, hell, we'll drop 'em off. Get in the back seat, sonny." Bedford climbed in, stumbling over Reddick, and huddled down in a corner. His face was twitching. The tall gunman got in between them, sighed, and reached for a cigar. He seemed bored.

I told Corcoran about the gun in my hand. "I'm putting it away now," I said, climbing out of the car, and shoving the revolver under my coat. "I'll be seeing you, Corcoran, some day."

The short wide hood got in behind the wheel and gunned the motor. "You sure will," Corcoran chuckled. The Reising swung slowly up until it was eyeing my belt buckle. He reached over and flipped the Smith & Wesson from its holster. The gun disappeared under his coat. "You most certainly will." He opened the rear door and jerked his head at Mike Bedford. "You, kid, get out! Come on, damn it, we haven't got all night for this!"

Bedford moved sluggishly, uncertainly, from the car. I could see his knees trembling. Corcoran grunted to me, "Take his place, bright boy. Cops make better riding company on a trip like this!"

I moved back until my shoulders hit the tonneau of the car. "That wasn't part of this!" I said. "I don't go with this—"

"You go with this, chum. On your fanny or on your face with a couple slugs in you. Doesn't matter to me." The gun nudged my belly and he put his face close to mine. "Or maybe there's a reason why you shouldn't?"

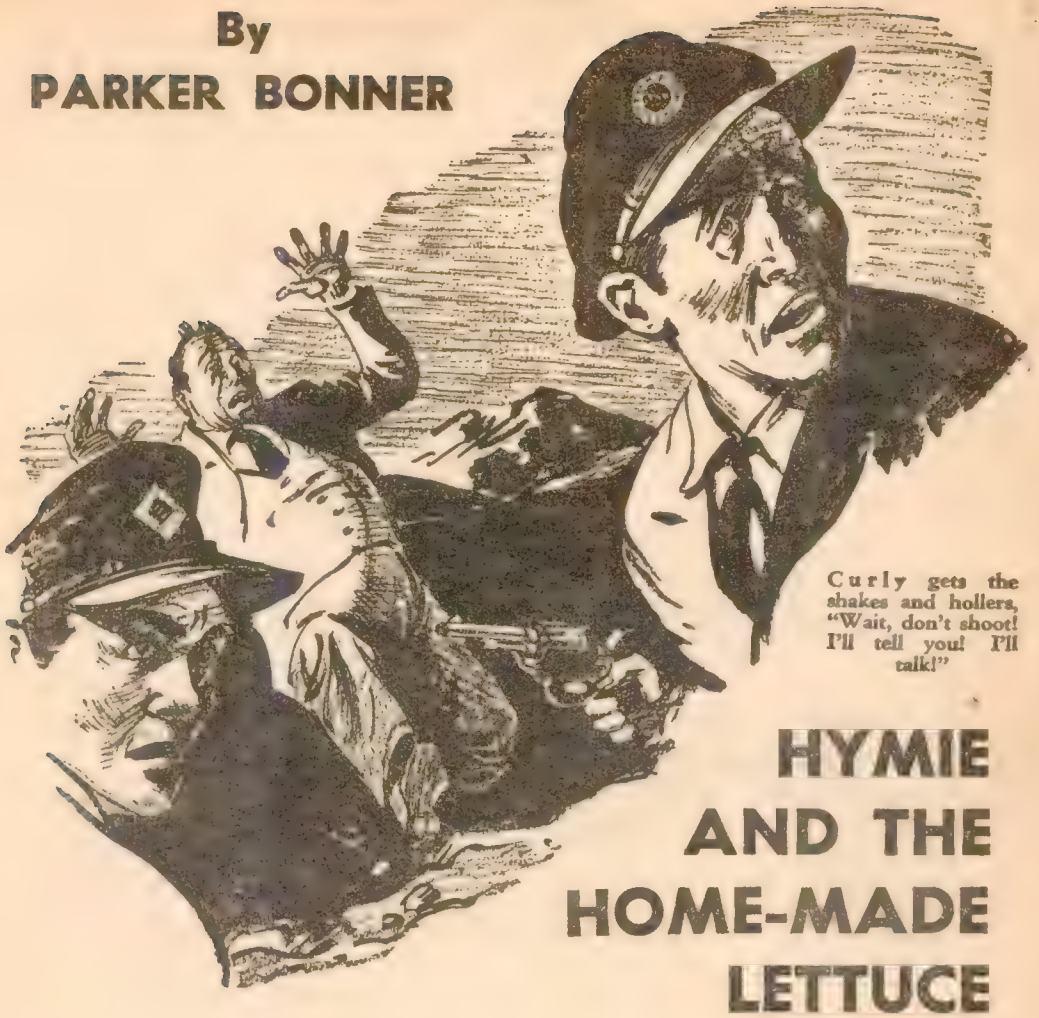
I closed my eyes for a second. Sweat plastered my shirt to my back. There would be the long, dismal stretch of deserted road, the smooth purr of the car traveling at high speed. And then there would be the first grinding clatter in the motor as the sand I'd dumped in the tank took hold, the lurching loss of motion, the slow turn of Corcoran's great red head as he realized what was happening. And the sirens behind.

I opened my eyes and looked at him and around him. Off toward the road I saw Mavis Bedford standing, her mouth slack as Mike Bedford walked toward her. I started to laugh.

"No," I said to Corcoran. "Hell, no. There aren't any reasons why I shouldn't go along. Not a reason in the world."

I got into the back seat with Chief Reddick and the tall, thin gunman, and settled myself for the ride.

By
PARKER BONNER



Curly gets the shakes and hollers, "Wait, don't shoot! I'll tell you! I'll talk!"

HYMIE AND THE HOME-MADE LETTUCE

Mamie, it is bad enough I learn that this bag of C-notes I am carting around never saw the inside of the U. S. Mint, but when I discover that said home-made lettuce is slowly being wove into a Nevada hangnoose for your little Hymie—Mamie, I know *I should have stood in bed!*

OKAY MAMIE, so it is three days past our anniversary and you have been phoning the morgue and Captain Scott tells you he hopes I get eaten by Indians, but the way I see it you are not the one with something to crab about. Didn't I even send you a telegram that isn't collect and bring you a silver dollar for a souvenir like they don't use in any civilized places anymore?

Mamie, in this business you cannot ever tell where a cabbie will get a haul to, and this is one of them times you just gotta believe, no matter how it sounds.

I am hanging on this hotel cab rack gabbing with some of the boys when this customer come out, and he looks impor-

tant enough that everybody hops for him right off. He is a big monkey and dressed up plenty expensive, and he just stands there and looks us all over like he is picking out a fish at the Fulton market, and finally he gives me the come-over.

I am patting myself on the back that it pays off to keep up my hack first class when my fare leans forward and tells me to head for this airport, which I do.

I should of smelled a gimmick right then, as he sounds as local as Forty-second but he gets real chummy.

"I travel around a lot," he says, "and long ago I find out when I want a friend I can trust and I don't know nobody, I will pick out a cabbie.

"Like you," he says. "I come into town a stranger, and all of a sudden I need somebody bad, so I walk down to the rack and there you are, and I know I can hand you the dough and sleep good while you take it out for me. Understand what I mean? It keeps up my faith in my fellow humans."

Maybe it is because I am not used to this soft soap coming out of customers that I feel good and open my yap and tell this mug, "It is a swell surprise to see somebody appreciates us, and any time I can be of service it is all part of the routine."

"I knew it." he says pounding me on the shoulder. "Good old Hymie, good old cabbie that never lets you down. And it so happens that I find myself in a jackpot at the moment and you give me an idea how I can save my business when it is heading for the reefs, but fast."

He is grinning like one of these masks in a movie house, but I gotta tell him.

"Pal," I say, "this is one time you draw a blank, because even my own wife tells me all the time I am not any business man, and I am sorry I cannot give you a hand."

"Nuts," my customer laughs. "It is not business I am relying on you to take care of, but I am going to make you a special envoy to take a very important package to a joe and put it in his hands and nobody else's. It is like an ambassador you are."

WELL, Mamie, with a build-up like this, can I say no? And delivering packages looks like a thing I can do while I am hauling my usual freight and not lose anything by it.

"Okay," I nod. "Just give me this joe's address and the bundle, and then you are in."

But he wants to explain. "You see," he says, "I have got an important appointment in Washington which I have got to keep, but this morning I get a phone call from my partner that our business needs a lot of cash in a hurry. And because certain unethical customers are very interested in seeing us behind the eight-ball they will be doing everything to make sure the cash does not get delivered in time.

"This means I do not dare telegraph this dough, or trust it to the mails, or use any of the usual channels for such a transmission. It has got to be a personal messenger which these no-good citizens will not be expecting and make any trouble for. Somebody they never dream is connected with me. Business, as you know, is not any peaches and cream but a dog-eating contest, and an honest gee has to be at his wits' ends all the time to make a legal dollar and keep a part of it."

I see how this can be, as most of the traffic that rides in my hack is always sputtering about how hard it is with business, and I can sympathize personally from watching Juanita, the lady checker at our garage, squeezing out the last copper from the stable of jockeys every day. So I tell him it will be a pleasure to help somebody beat down the ears of these butt-inskies, and we are by this time arriving at the airport.

"Wait a minute for me," my monkey says, and heads off for the ticket stands, and pretty soon comes back very happy looking. "Mine for Washington," he counts off, sticking a paper in his pocket, "And yours for Las Vegas."

He passes over this label and then hauls out of his brief case a bundle wrapped up in brown paper. "Dough," he says. "Cash, like the blood of life, and the name of the joe you give it to is Harry Corker who you will find at the Green Cheetah Club. Do not talk to anybody about him, and only ask a bartender named Curly at the main bar where Harry is. Got it?"

"Hold on a minute, Mac," I say when he stops for wind. "I do not make any deal to fly out of town on this envoy. I

like to help out a pal, but there is the crate I got to think about, and Juanita will not take it kindly for me to go off leaving it in the middle of the Jersey flats. And where is this Las Vegas anyhow?"

He waves me a hand like it is nothing. "Run on in and call Juanita and tell her I am paying you two bills for this errand. C-bills that is, Hymie, and she can send out somebody to ride the jallopy home. You'll be back in nothing flat. All you gotta do is hand this package to Harry and hop back on the plane. As simple as that."

For two C's it should have warned me, but I think at the time the guy is really in a spot and is dough-heavy enough that he don't care what it costs to take care of his beef. And likewise, I think about this fur coat you are still yapping for, and I see this is a way to get same, plus maybe one of them arctic flying jackets for me to drive around in the winter. .

So I call Juanita, and because I do her a favor once a while ago getting her husband off a hot frying pan, she does not argue too long. "Leave the keys under the hood," she says, "and do not get scalped by them wild Indians."

I start to ask her what is this about Indians, but my customer is tugging on my sleeve. "The plane is ready," he says. "Come on."

So I hang up and do not have time to call you, and we make a run for the airplane. "Them two C's," I tell him on the way. "It ain't that I do not trust a friend, but times like these, anything can happen to you before I see you next."

He is fast on a hint, and he pulls out these bills and passes them over. Then he grins again. "I'll make you a bet," he says. "I'll bet you ain't got them when you get back. Fact I'll lay dough on it. You show me those bills when you come home and I will add another one to them." Then he shoves me up the gang plank and the door shuts in my face and we are off.

Mamie, they really got something in them planes. They can haul a whole freight car load of passengers and they never have to worry about anything, like traffic cops and jerks that never learn to drive. All they got to dodge is birds, and they are big enough the birds have got sense enough to stay out of the way.

The scenery goes by under us very slow, and I think we are not getting anywhere fast, but it changes too, and come evening we are sailing over the desert which I always hear is away to hell-an-gone from Manhattan, and it is really something.

Some day, Mamie, I will ride you over in the hack and give you a look. It is like the ocean, only brown, and there is a lot of it. We make some stops, but they are not Las Vegas, and finally the stewardess says she will tell me when we get there. It is right in the middle of night when she shakes me and I see the door is open.

She is going to push me out clear up in the air I think, but then another joe tells me the ship has come down while I am asleep and is sitting on the ground and it is okay—I do not have to jump.

OUTSIDE, there is some lights around for the airport, only it is a jerk place so little I do not see how they can find it in the dark, and then I look off and there is a circus or something all lighted up which they tell me is this Las Vegas.

I start to hike over to it, and I get to

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the road when this cab pulls alongside, and the jock says to hop in.

"Scram," I tell him. "I should shell out to you to ride me a block."

But he goes crazy laughing. "It's nine miles to there," he says. "If it's any under, you ride free. I should let you hoof it, only I see your badge and you are in the brotherhood and somebody will have to steer you around this county. It ain't like New York, bud."

With this I agree. The jerk is right, it is nine miles to this place, and it is not a circus, but a whole town, chopped off clean right around it and sitting in the middle of this desert where not even an Indian can hide.

This jock's name is Sandy, and he talks like Gary Cooper in a horse opera and tells me all about this whistle-stop. "You watch yourself," he says. "Stick to the clubs downtown. You can lose just as much there, but it's in our class. Them big places cater to the movie trade."

But I tell him again the Green Cheetah, and he shrugs and pulls in a drive to this joint that looks like a country club, with a swimming pool out front and little houses scattered all around. It is all lit up like there is a celebration going on, but Sandy says it is like this every night, and nobody ever goes to bed in Vegas. They take a vacation up there and then go home and sleep it off.

I do not make it. His hack is painted up like mine, but he does not act or drive like any cabbie I ever see. He hops out like I am the king of Siam and opens the door for me. "I'll wait around," he says. "You'll be back. Even if they got a room, the prices will change your mind."

He is so smart I pull out one of my C-bills and hand him and wait for him to squawk. Instead, he doesn't. He gives it a glance and fishes out a roll that could choke Juanita and starts peeling off green paper like he does it all the time. He shoves them at me and grabs my bill, and I am just about to grab it back because I am going to take it home whole, when he pokes it under the dash lamp and turns around.

He's not friendly any more then, and his voice is nasty. "Not through me," he says. "I'll take it in silver."

Which is what I want, but I do not get this change in him. I do not get a lot of things in this country, though, so I do not beef, and he pulls away fast and I go on into the Green Cheetah.

There is a big foyer like in a class hotel and behind it I do not hardly believe what I see. It is another big room, and all about it are craps layouts and roulette wheels and the neatest collection of gambling instruments you would wish to behold. And all right out in plain sight for any dick that should happen to walk by. Honest, Mamie, you would think I am in the state of Nevada where such things is legal, and it is no little surprise to see a sign that says I am.

Way at the back I see a long bar, and I head for that, and sure enough, there is a jerk behind it that everybody is calling Curly, so I stick my cap in my pocket and catch him when nobody is near and ask him where this Harry Corker can be found.

He looks at me careful for a long time and finally says, "Stick around. He'll be along." and leaves me like that.

Well, there is nothing to do sticking around except watch the mobs at the tables, and I am telling you it gets to be breath-catching, the dough that is tossed about there. C-notes on the line like they was chicken feed. And all of a sudden, Mamie, a weakness comes over me as a guy I am watching shoots eight straight passes. There is a blonde dame with him and I hear one of the dealers say these two are really hot tonight, and before I realize it I have heaved one of my C-s on the Come line. I don't know what comes over me, Mamie. It is like I am somebody else, and I have not got time to grab it back before the blonde rolls out a seven.

The dealer shells out another C, and I reach for it then, but this joe grabs my arm. "Let it ride," he says. "She'll throw four passes. Been doing it all night."

I leave it ride, Mamie, don't ask me why, because I am not in control of my senses, and watching these size bills pile up in front of me, well, I just don't believe they are real, that's all.

She makes four passes all right, and the jerk nods, and I drag down a stack that is making my head swim across the channel, and just because it is possible I am not dreaming, I throw back my first C

note on the next, and hold my breath.

This time she craps out, just like I am told, and before I can tell the dealer I want back this special bill, he shoves it down a little slot with a stick, and it is gone.

"Hey," I yell. "That's my lucky piece. Dig it out and I'll give you another," and I am waving my fist full of green stuff at him when a voice comes in behind me.

"You got lots more," it says. "Forget it."

Somebody has latched onto my arm and is tugging at me, and I turn around into a bunch of teeth grinning at me. "I'm Harry," the joe says. "Come on."

The dealer is giving me a look like I am crazy or something and I tell him again to fish out my bill, and at this minute this Harry cuts me off in the middle with a yank that hauls me off my balance and bangs my head on a slot machine.

WELL, Mamie, I am very worried about this bill that will get me another if I take it home to New York, and I resent this Harry's type of behavior and without giving it another thought I wrap one around his ears to teach him some manners.

It is funny how quick everbody is quiet, and right now there is a jerk in a brown shirt with a badge on it that moves up in front of me and nods at the door.

"Take it easy, mister," he says, very low. "I think you better walk around outside a while."

His badge says that he is a special deputy of some kind and I see he is not a regular cop and I do not have to be polite. "Take it easy yourself, bud," I tell him. "I got something to deliver to this wiseaker, and I am going to give it to him before I clear out. You want to try and stop me?"

It's funny how these Western gees are, Mamie. He gives me a look like ice cubes and nods. "In here, yes," he says. "Let's both of you take a walk."

Well, he has got a gun on his stomach and his fist is sitting on it, so I do not argue. He crowds Harry and me out a back door and shuts it behind us with him inside, and Harry is very sore.

"You are a fat-head for fair," he tells me, "making everybody look at me. The last thing I want. . . . Gimme the package and get the hell out of here!"

"In a minute, chum," I tell him. "But first there is some names I want to call you."

But I have only called him about one when he jumps at my neck like he wants to choke me, and at the same time a gun goes off in the bushes which are across the driveway where we are standing, and Harry flops on his face with a hole in his head. There is more surprises in this town than anywhere I ever am.

But I do not stand about, wondering what goes on. I take a dive for the corner of the building, and another shot plops in the wall where I go before I am out of line, and I keep going. This second shot tells me it is not Harry that somebody is gunning for, and he only gets it because he jumps in front of me at that moment. I do not know why I am being picked for a target, but I am not going to wait around and see.

This Harry is dead, so I cannot deliver his money for his partner in New York, and I will put some distance between me and this Western hospitality without asking any questions.

Out in the parking lot there is a bunch of pushcarts with motor bikes hitched on their back, and I grab one and take off through those winding driveways and finally find the highway and head for the airport. Mamie, it is like driving in a nightmare. Here is this gadget and me *put-putting* along at a good clip of maybe fifteen miles per hour which is all I find she will do, and everything is quiet ahead of me without any lights at all.

Even sitting down on this bicycle I am the tallest thing for as far around as I can see, which is probably a hundred miles. It is still night all right, but them stars out there is big as saucers and show up this desert like a vacant house. Only it is big. How it is big! The sky comes clear down to the ground all around, and the ground is even flatter than Flatbush. It gives me a feeling like everything is hollow and my scooter is not moving a bit.

I am maybe a mile out in this no-man's land when lights come up behind me from a car and the car passes me and turns across the road which blocks where I am going. I have got to stop, which I do not like.

Then out of the car jumps Sandy, this cabbie I meet before, and he is swinging a jack handle very business-like and making for me.

"Where do you think you're going?" he wants to know.

"Back to God's little island," I tell him, "before I find out who it is takes such a quick dislike to me and is maybe a better shot the next crack he gets. Get out of my way, cowboy."

He gives me a mean grin. "You Eastern hot-shots," he says. "You think you can bust out here and pull off anything you take a notion to. But, bud, you're gonna find out different. We don't like our customers getting shot up. And definitely we don't like punks who pay off with home-made money. Get in. You're riding back to the sheriff."

I just look at him. "Do I get it," I say, "that the cab jocks out here are also the cops? You are in a fine profession to be playing on their team."

He wiggles his jack handle at me. "I am not a cop," he tells me, "but I believe there will be reward lying around for the joe that runs in any murderers or counterfeiters, no matter who they are. Get in."

"Okay," I say. "In a minute. But first I want to know where this burg gets its ideas." I go ahead and tell him how I am out here and all that happens since I hit town. "I do not shoot this Harry," I say, "and I do not know anything about any counterfeiters."

He looks at me funny. "That hundred-dollar bill you hand me back at the Cheetah is counterfeit," he says. "I look at it especially because the drivers I know are not in the habit of paying off taxi fares in that kind of moolah."

I have a horrible feeling and grab for my wallet, which move Sandy misinterprets and makes a swing with the jack handle that I only just manage to duck. I fish out the money that is in it, and then I remember that the other hundred I get in New York is down a hole in a crap table.

"Oh-oh," I say, and tell Sandy about this, and how my New York customer promises me another if I bring back the two. "If the one is funny it is odds-on that the other is too," I say. "And now I am beginning to wonder about this dough he says is supposedly in the bundle."

Sandy gets on the dash lamp, and we unwrap the package, and it is money all right, all in fifties and hundreds. Sandy looks it over and nods and says it is no good, but I do not see how he knows. It looks okay to me. But like he tells me, around Las Vegas he gets used to seeing C-bills all the time and is familiar with them, which I can not lay any claim to.

HE IS still suspicious that I am pulling a fast one, but we look towards town and there is another car away off coming at us.

"Get in," Sandy decides. "This will be the cops putting out some road blocks and I will have to take a little more time to sort out this yarn of yours." He hitches the scooter bike on behind the cab and puts me on the floor and heads back past the cops. They do not even stop us as I guess they figure we are headed the wrong way for me to be escaping, and Sandy pulls up by the Green Cheetah and whispers for me to keep down.

"I find your bike up the road a couple of miles," he yells at somebody across the road. "Your guy must be loco, trying it across the desert." He whips out and unhitches the gadget and we are off again before these footsteps I hear get too close. Then he takes to some back roads that bounce around like they are full of marbles, and he finally pulls up by a cab rack.

He blows his horn in a signal, and six, seven, hackies gather round and he tells them. "I got a problem here in back," he says. "This is Hymie Beerman who runs a cab back in New York, and either he is a full-blood member of our profession whose luck is running out, or else he is worth some reward money for passing funny bills and blowing down a certain Harry Corker. You gotta hold a jury and decide which."

Then he gives them the pitch and they argue back and forth and I do not know if they will throw me to the Indians or not until one joe pipes up.

"In my long association with this business," he says, "I never hear of a taxi engineer that makes any plans in these denominations. If he is going to be crooked he is more like to roll a drunk in a dark alley. This alibi is too tall not to be true."

"My sentiments exactly, Sleepy," says Sandy, "so I see it is our clear duty to keep this jerk under a bush while the cops are looking for him, and try and figure some way we can sneak him out of town."

"This is going to be some job," says Sleepy, "as you know they will be watching all the exits very carefully, and a hundred and fifty miles across this desert without water is no hike to set a brother out on."

I think it is time I get in this bull session myself, so I tell them, "Nix to this routine. So I make New York and what happens? The bulls back there know me like they know the news banner on the Times Building, and they will bounce me back here in custody like I am a volley ball. The job I got to do is to turn up this customer that is behind the play and get my skirts out from behind this eight-ball.

"What do you guys know about this Harry Corker and even this Curly bartender?"

There is more confab then, and it seems that nobody knows anything about Harry except that he is around for a while, they do not even know for how long. This Harry does a neat job of playing anonymous when not even the hackies spot him.

Curly they have not got much more on. He has got a little white house where he lives, but he keeps out of the way and does not make any noise.

"The way I see it," says Sleepy, "your lead is in New York. The guy there makes this stuff and ships it out to Harry and he is playing a lone hand and passing these bills hither and yon about the tables for chips which he cashes for good money. Curly probably doesn't know the caper."

"This is maybe smart thinking in these woods," I tell him, "but look. Sandy spots my phony bill in the dark under a dash light. Are these dealers out here dopes enough they will not nail even one when Harry is papering the town with them? Maybe he only uses them on the tables when there is a mob around with lots of business, but there is more to it than this, and I will take a bet that Curly is in the mouse's nest some place."

"I think I will buy this," says Sandy. "You guys scamper around and see what you can pick up, and Hymie and I will go get Curly. If he does not wish to see it our way, we will meet you in an hour on the Boulder road for a little party."

On the way back to the Cheetah I think of something else, which I tell Sandy. "When Harry gets blasted," I say, "it is not Curly who is in the bushes. He is at the bar close to the door this special deputy shoves me out, and he is too busy to go around another way and be there at this time."

Sandy raises me an eyebrow. "Who you aiming at now?" he says.

"The deputy," I say. "He is the only one acts like he does not enjoy my company, and he has time to shut me out and go around through another door and get to the bushes. He has also got a gun handy."

Sandy takes some time to think about this and then nods. "We will take him along with Curly, he decides, and he parks me on the floor as we turn in the drive and hands me a very old-fashioned gun out of his dash compartment, and we arrange a plan.

Sandy goes in and gets Curly and the deputy to come out by telling them he knows where I am at and will cut them in on the reward if they will lend him a hand and identify me.

It works like a charm, and I hear the deputy telling all about what a bad character I am before he gets close enough that I raise up and show him the nose of Sandy's gun. Nobody hollers, and we put Curly and the deputy in the back and me in front where I can keep them under the gun and ask questions. But they both play very dumb and we see that it is going to take more than asking these birds to make them sing.

So Sandy shrugs and heads for this Boulder road, which I think must be some extra bumpy back way. Instead it turns out it is the way they go to a dam they got about twenty miles out of town.

THE OTHER jocks are waiting and have not found out any information in this hush-hush deal, so we lead off and go to this dam. Mamie, I am telling you, it looks like New York standing on its head and it goes way down in this ditch that you cannot even see the bottom of.

We stop up the hill aways where somebody chopped off the world right at the edge of the road, and Sandy says all out.

Curly is acting a little uncertain of him-

self now, but the deputy puts up a front. "I don't know what you think you're doing," he sounds off, "but you're putting your necks in a noose sure as I'm alive."

"Which you ain't going to be long," I tell him, "without you come across and say what this play is all about and why you try to knock me out of the running earlier this same evening when I do not even know you."

The other cabbies are moving in around, and we make a piece of a circle and gradually shove this Curly and the deputy closer and closer to the edge of this ditch. The deputy's fingers keep reaching at his belt where his gun was that we take away from him, but he never looks scared, just mad.

"You both got about two shakes to spill it," I remind them. "I got no yen to take this rap for you, but if I am going to take a rap it will be for something I do, like chucking you into this gully here."

Curly takes a quick look behind then and gets the shakes. "No," he hollers. "Wait! I'll tell you! I'll—"

He does not get a chance to finish because there is a guy in ambush, above us on the road that lets fly at Curly and knocks him clear overboard. And while we are still staring after him, this voice yells down for us to all get our paws up and turn around slow, and for me to drop down the gun I am holding.

We turn around, and it is getting pretty light then, so I see who is pulling this hi-jack and it is the dealer from the Green Cheetah that pays me off at this crap crap table. He is grinning like he does not think anything is funny but enjoys it anyhow.

"Sorry, boys," he says, "but this is the end of the line, and it is all the fault of this New York jerk. If he keeps his trap shut tonight none of this would have happened."

"I don't get it," I tell him, trying to stall for a little time so maybe one of us gets an idea. "What is it that I do that makes you wish to rub me off?"

He laughs a nasty laugh. "Making a ruckus at the club about the bill," he says. "They'd been going over the tables okay before that, but your noise made the dealer with me suspicious and he checked it. That was bad enough; I could have passed that one without anybody connecting me to it, but then you have to clip Harry and make some more fuss.

"The way you was headed, you'd have us all smoked out and in the federal jug, but quick. You got a genius for bollixing up the works. You even get Harry killed by making him jump at you just when I am trying to get you out of the way.

"So now you've done all your talking, cabbie, get ready to start driving a cloud around."

With my back to this gully and what's in front of me I don't see where any of us have got a lot to look ahead at, but I have to make a try. I whisper at Sandy to look sharp, and then I yell, "Wait! In my pocket I got a whole bundle of C-notes, which I will pass over in return for a favor and we will keep quiet long enough for you to lam."

The dealer sneers. "What you win on that table won't take me far enough, bud. Get ready."

I try a laugh myself. "That's just loose change," I say. "I got a whole bundle I bring out from a guy in New York. You know the kind I mean, and it was good enough to get by here for a long time."

The dealer's eyes get wide then. "The hell you say! You mean Silky Smith sent it out by you?" He gives a wild yippee and then bears down again. "Okay, wisey," he tells me. "Toss it in the road."

I fish the package out of my pocket. I am only one step from the edge of this drop-off, and I hold out the package over it. If I let go, it is not going to do anybody any good. "I do not like hardware in this kind of a deal," I tell him. "Heave your gun over the side if you want to play."

He laughs at me again. "Throw me the dough, stupid, before I plug you."

"Plug me and the stuff goes over the side," I tell him back. "Like this." I let a couple of bills blow off in the wind, and I am watching the dealer close and so is Sandy. I give him a nudge and throw some more paper away, and the dealer is staring at it like he is tempted to jump over and chase it.

HE FORGETS about us for just one second, and Sandy is right on the beam and lets fly with the jack handle he has been hanging onto. The dealer sees it too

late, just before it catches him in the face and jerks him back. And then we are all jumping and there is a free-for-all with him on the bottom and the deputy joining in, and when we get untangled the dealer is flat and out in the cold.

"Nice job," says somebody. I look, and around this bend in the road strolls a joe in a real copper's uniform. A bike boy.

I guess every place the cops got their timing down like that. "You're a mite late," I tell him. "The fun's over."

"And a good show it was," he tells me. "I wondered what you was getting set for."

I just stare at him. "You was watching, and you didn't take him out? What do they pay coppers for out here?"

He laughs. "Out here a guy don't like to be interrupted," he says. "Oh, I'd have got him before he started shooting, but it was better this way."

I quit even trying to talk then, Mamie. All I can think about is how soon I can catch a plane out of this Saturday-afternoon serial and get some place where I know what goes on. I say nothing all the way back to town except I turn down all these cabbies' kind offers to get me a job if I will stick around. They are nice joes, but I like the quiet life.

At the station there is a kid lieutenant that listens in while the deputy and this bike boy give him a run-down and washes me white.

Finally he nods. "Okay," he says. "You do us a favor, Hymie, and we appreciate it, but there is only one thing. There is a law you cannot pass around counterfeit dough even if you don't know what it is, and you are liable on this count. But in view of the service you have performed, I think I can talk the Cheetah out of preferring charges if you will give them back the money you win starting in with that first phony hundred."

Well, Mamie, I hear of this law before, and I have been wondering when this will happen, so I do not even have any heart in the argument I give him and finally he gets the dough.

"At least," I tell him, "I have got a plane ticket home." I pull it out and wave it at him, and he looks it over.

He shakes his head. "You really did get taken, boy," he says. "This is not a ticket, but only the folder from your west-bound fare. You got any money left to get another?"

Mamie, there is a time when everybody needs a cop, and right then I start screaming for Captain Scott, who is on Homicide back in New York but who has got me out of a jack-pot before, and finally this lieutenant gets big-hearted and puts in the call.

Scott is some surprised to hear from me, and he is very interested when I tell him what happens and here I am with no dough to get home.

"I am sorry, Hymie," he tells me, "but I can't send you the money. Why don't you just stay out there? It's a very healthy place to live. I'll see your family gets a train right away."

"No!" I yell at him. "No. At night it is like this, and in the daytime it is probably worse, with Indians even. Wait . . ." I pass the phone to this lieutenant who is grinning at me. "You don't want me here," I tell him. "Get on this thing and make that cold meat loaf do something."

The lieutenant takes the phone and shrugs. "You'd like Las Vegas, once you got used to it," he tells me. "Give it a try. Everybody else I ever hear wants to get out of the city." Then he talks to Captain Scott and gives me a nice build-up. "He's been a great help," he says. "All by himself, almost, he caught a gang we've been unable to identify for six months. And you might pick up Silky Smith back there and send him along. He's got the plates."

I can hear Scott's voice. "Glad to do it," he says. "Glad you like Hymie. Why, Hymie's the best little murderer catcher we got. Practically runs us out of business all the time. You keep him around, you'll get every case solved without even asking. You keep him."

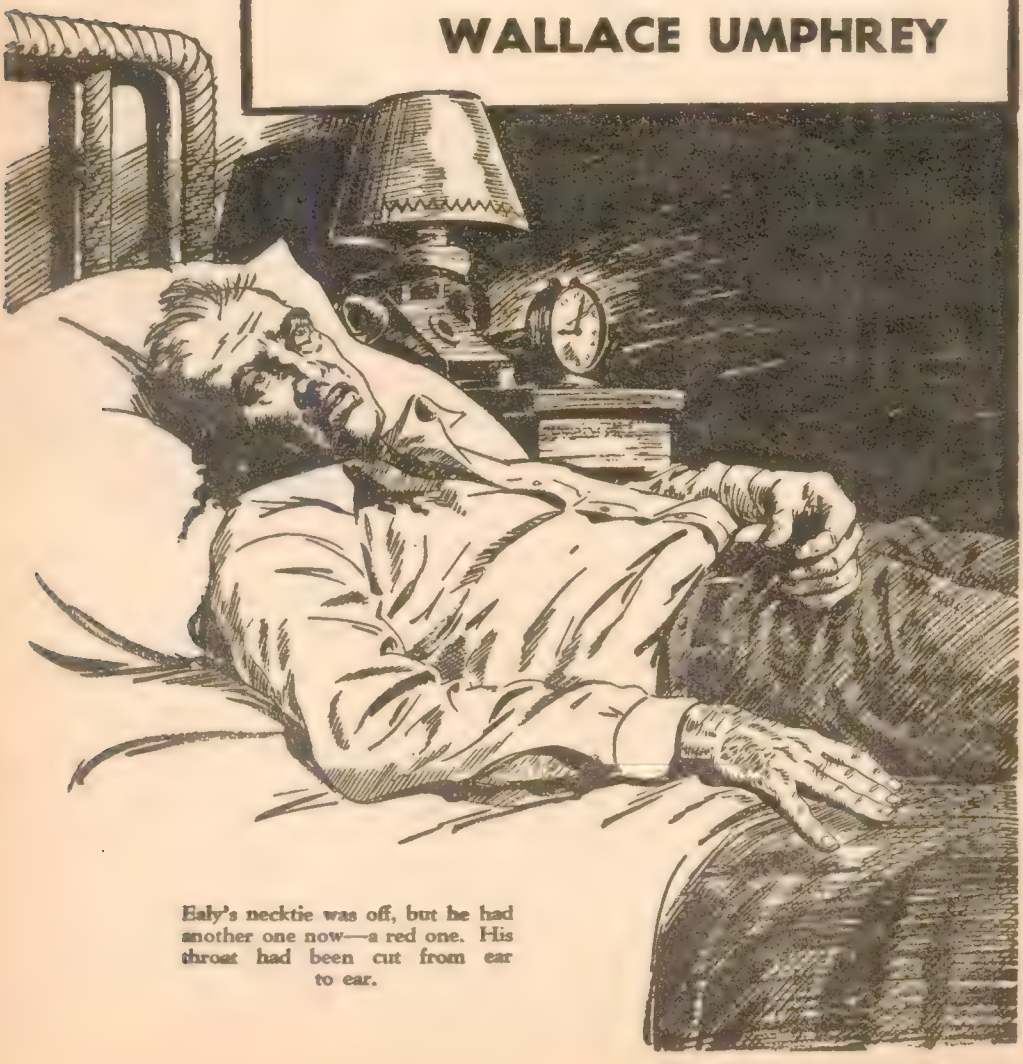
The lieutenant's eyes get suspicious and he hangs up and looks at the phone for a long time, and then he looks at me and chews on his lip.

"Tell you what," he says. "This Scott thinks so much of you I'd hate to take you away from him. I get the idea it's a great sacrifice, which I can't accept. Come on. I'll personally buy your ticket and take you to the plane." He smiles very sweet. "And put you on it, and stand there, watching you take off."

BYE-BYE, BEAUTIFUL!

By

WALLACE UMPHREY



Baly's necktie was off, but he had another one now—a red one. His throat had been cut from ear to ear.

"I'm Carnavan," he said. "Don't you cry for me!" And I wouldn't—not even with Francie dead, or Carnavan off the force. . . . The only one I could cry for was myself—a shamus with two murders on my hands and maybe, soon, a hole in my head!

CHAPTER ONE

Hello, Murder—Good-bye, Francie!

THE BULLET had entered her brain through the left temple. She wasn't pretty now. Maybe she hadn't been much good, but I guess that didn't matter. Nobody deserves to die alone.

I watched the deputy M.E. examining the body. I looked at the police photog setting up his equipment. I lifted a shoulder at the two lab men who had followed us, and they went to work. I glanced at Jim Ealy, the

house dick here at the Seneca. I looked at the two packed suitcases standing near the door, and the black suede purse lying neatly or top of them. I stared down at the .25 automatic lying on the rug beside the body.

Then I looked at Al Carnavan.

He was watching the medical examiner through lowered lids. His big shoulders were hunched, his legs spread and his feet flat on the rug. He was leaning forward slightly. His face was a little strained, but the hard flat sheen was still there in his yellowish eyes. He turned to me and his thin lips twisted bitterly. He said, "So-long, Francie. So-long, you tramp." He still watched me, but he was talking to her. He had been married to her once.

"Tough," I told him.

He said in a harsh voice, "Don't you cry for me."

A maid had found the body and Jim Ealy had put in the call. Cap Raglan, chief of Homicide, had routed Al Carnavan and me out of a pinochle game in the detectives' room down at the central bureau. Al Carnavan and I were teamed up because I was the only guy in the whole department who could work with him. All the rest hated his guts. I never knew how I felt about him. Together we made a pretty good team. Jim Ealy had reported the killing without naming the victim. Otherwise, Cap Raglan would never have sent us.

Carnavan lit a cigarette. His lips were twisted into that hard, meaningless grin. You could never tell how he felt or what he thought about inside. His basic attitudes toward life went back to his early childhood. I guess his childhood hadn't been very pretty.

He mashed out his cigarette and then he took over.

We both ranked equally and I had seven years service over him, but he took over. Technically, I was in charge. But that was just so much unimportant nonsense. It was all right with me. I guessed I wasn't very smart. I did the leg work and he did the thinking, and that way we'd solved a lot of toughies.

"Ealy," he said now, "tell it."

"She was checking out this morning," Jim Ealy said uneasily. "Yesterday afternoon she squared her bill. A maid came in to clean up the room, thinking she was gone, and found her like this."

JIM EALY was a big man, about Carnavan's size and build. He wore a shiny blue serge suit, black, square-toed shoes and a soft felt hat pulled over his bald head. He had small, canny, dishonest eyes. He had been a cop once, but not a good one, and he had been tossed off the force for accepting bribes.

"Why was she checking out?" Carnavan asked him.

Ealy shrugged. "I don't know."

"Where was she going?"

Again Ealy shrugged.

"Where'd she work?"

"I know that one. Jesse Fancher's night club."

"Who killed her?"

"How should I know?" Ealy asked. "All this is your business. She always had a lot of guys on the string. Cripes, she wasn't nothing but a tramp."

Carnavan clipped him on the jaw and said, "Watch your big mouth."

The blow jolted Ealy. "What's the matter?" he muttered. "You hated her yourself."

"Sure," Carnavan said bitterly. "She was a tramp. But I don't like hearing it from a jerk like you."

The M.E. stood up. "Dead seven-eight hours. That makes it around two-thirty in the morning. Contact wound." He nudged the gun lying on the rug. "That did it."

"Her gun," Carnavan said. "I gave it to her when we were hitched."

The lab men finished up. No prints. Nothing. The closet was empty. Everything was packed except a small wind-up clock on the dressing table. The alarm was set for five-thirty and the spring had run down.

"Suicide?" I asked.

Carnavan stared. "What do you think? Let's see if you've learned anything."

When he was in this mood, he made me feel embarrassed. He knew I was better at leg work. Sometimes he made me feel like an idiot.

"Probably not," I said, flushing. "If she were going to do the Dutch, she wouldn't pack all her things. She wouldn't set the alarm for five-thirty. She wouldn't go around cleaning up and wiping off prints. We can take a dermal nitrate test to see if she fired the gun."

Carnavan grinned. "You're learning, pal.

Go right along to the head of the class."

He went over and picked up the suede purse. His back was toward the rest of us. Methodically, he rummaged through the purse. He pulled out a small, tight wad of bills.

I watched him slip the money into his pocket.

"Here's a bus ticket to San Francisco," he said, turning. He gave me a lazy grin, but his yellowish eyes were hard. He said to me, "Let's ask some questions." We went out to the hall, away from the others. He grasped my arm in the vise of his big fingers. "You saw me take that dough?"

"The M.E. saw it too."

"Maybe not. Hell with it. You say a word about it and I'll break your arm."

We split up. Carnavan went down to question the night clerk. I started asking questions along the hall. Nobody had heard the shot. I beat him back to the room.

"Why do you take his lip?" the M.E. asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "He's a good cop."

The M.E.'s face was red. "He's a sadist. He browbeats everybody he knows. The force would be better off without him."

I shook my head. Maybe the M.E. was right. I didn't know. In the past Carnavan and I had broken a lot of cases. It was easy to see, though, why they all hated him.

The morgue boys came in and carted away the body. The room cleared. By the time Carnavan got back the room was empty, impersonal, like any vacant hotel room.

"Where'd they take her?" he asked.

"The morgue."

"Good enough."

"Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

"Why should I?" he asked me. "Here's what I found out. A guy named Anthony Fremont left her room here about two. He went out to the street, and the night clerk says he looked sore as hell. About fifteen minutes later he blew back in again. He rode the elevator up here. Five minutes later he was back down again. His face was white." Carnavan cursed. "Fremont!"

"You know him?" I asked.

"He's a jerk."

"Your knowing him may help. What does he do?"

"A teller in a lousy bank."

"Five minutes," I said. "Long enough to murder. It ties in pretty well with the M.E.'s time."

"Sure," he said.

We went out and climbed into our car. I drove back down to Headquarters. Carnavan lolled in the seat beside me, smoking, looking relaxed and untroubled. Nothing ever bothered him. He had never liked driving a car. His tweed suit was rumpled, but he didn't care. He made a fetish of not caring what anybody thought of him.

I hauled the car into the police garage. Before I could get out he put a hard hand on my arm.

"That dough," he said. "It was mine."

"Why?"

"When we were married she took me for everything I had. She bled me white. I'm getting some of it back now. She was a tramp."

I didn't say anything. Twice he'd called her a tramp. I didn't know. I'd worked with Carnavan for eight hours a day for a long time, but I knew nothing about his

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private life . When he'd been married he'd never invited me out to dinner. That's the way Carnavan was. Our relationship was purely business.

"You don't get it about the dough," he said.

"No." I told him.

His hand fell away. "Okay. To hell with it."

Cap Raglan wanted to see him right away. This information was relayed to him by a desk sergeant. Carnavan's expression didn't change. He turned away and went toward the stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

Tough Guy

I WAS in the detectives' room when Carnavan came back, maybe a half-hour later. There was a silence while we all just looked at him. He didn't say a word. He went to his locker and began to cram things into a small handbag. We all watched in silence. Nobody smiled or cracked wise.

Finally he turned to me. "The M.E. took his lousy story about the dough to Cap Raglan. I got a suspension out of it. Better tell the M.E. to stay out of dark alleys for a while."

I started to speak.

"Don't say it pal. I'll get along. Don't you cry for me."

He turned his back on all of us and stalked out. Somebody let out a long sigh. The power of his personality seemed to linger behind him.

Cap Raglan sent for me and I went up. He was gnawing on his grizzled mustache and his face flushed. He told me that Carnavan was suspended for an indefinite period.

"Why did he do it?" he asked me.

I told him what Carnavan had told me.

"It wouldn't make sense to anyone but Carnavan," he told me. "He turned over the money—close to a thousand bucks. He admitted taking it. He stood there and told me off. Now you tell me something. Why didn't I fix it so he was thrown clear to hell off the force?"

"Because he's a good cop."

"Maybe. I don't know." Raglan's smile was wintery. "Or maybe I felt sorry for him."

"Don't," I said. "Feel any way but that. He couldn't take it."

He nodded. "What about this case?"

I told him. "Fremont's vacation started today, so he isn't at work. They gave me his address. It's a rooming house. The landlady told me he wasn't home."

"It looks bad for this Fremont," Raglan said. "You'd better put a pick-up order on the radio."

"I've done that," I said.

"Good. You'll have to take it alone. I haven't got anybody to give you in place of Carnavan."

That was a shock. It was like being suddenly robbed of the thing that makes you tick. I felt lost. Carnavan had always been the brains of our team.

At lunch time I went across the street for a sandwich and a glass of beer. Carnavan was sitting at the bar, a beer glass in front of him. He gave me his loose-lipped grin. I took the seat beside him.

"How's your vacation?" I asked.

"Lousy," he said. "You got a line on Fremont yet?"

I shook my head.

"He killed her."

"That's what Cap Raglan thinks."

He leaned toward me. "What do *you* think?"

"I don't know," I said. "Frankly, I don't know."

He laughed jeeringly. "That doesn't surprise me." Then he leaned toward me once again. "How about letting me know when you pick Fremont up?"

I reminded him that he wasn't on the case now—or even on the cops. That didn't seem to bother him. He said, "I got to do something to get back on the cops. I guess that was a dumb stunt, taking that dough."

"Pretty dumb," I agreed. It surprised me to hear him admit it. It wasn't like him to admit mistakes.

"Let me know what goes on," he said. "If you need any help, let me know. Maybe if I crack the case you can put it in your report and Cap Raglan will pick up my suspension."

"Maybe," I said.

"About Francie," he said. "She's not at the morgue now."

"Huh?"

He looked away from me. "I had her taken to a funeral home."

I finished my sandwich and beer and then paid Limpy Morgan, who was sitting on a high stool behind the cash register. He gave me my change, then scowled down the bar at Carnavan. Then he turned back to me, his fat jowls quivering.

"I heard about Francie," he said.

"How?"

"Carnavan told me."

"He met her here, didn't he?" I asked.

Limpy Morgan nodded, still scowling. "She was a nice girl until she married him. All the time she worked here for me, she was a nice girl. I don't know what he did to her. He ought to have his throat cut."

I GOT the car out of the police garage and drove south past the city limits to Jesse Fancher's place. It was a quiet roadhouse, set back from the highway in a grove of trees, and it gave the county boys little trouble. Jesse Fancher, dark and smooth, was in his office. He waved me to a chair and then sat back, watchful.

I told him about Francie.

"Good God!" He looked shocked. "She quit night before last to go on her honeymoon."

"*She what?*" I asked.

"She was getting married again," he told me. "I kidded her a lot about how I'd never get a hat-check girl like her again. But I was glad to see her looking so happy. She was a nice kid. She never played around with the customers, but they all liked her."

"You know who she was going to marry?"

"Sure," he said. "A right joe. Guy named Tony Fremont."

That was that. Things didn't make sense now. I began to wish that Carnavan were along, to give me a hand. He was always quick on the cause-and-effect relationship. When I got back to Headquarters, they still hadn't located Fremont. I drove back down to the Seneca.

I found the night clerk eating what he called his breakfast in the hotel coffee shop. He couldn't add to what Carnavan had found out.

"Why would anyone kill her?" he asked. "She was with us about a year. Such a nice girl. Did Fremont do it?"

I told him I wasn't sure. I told him you could never tell about those things. Then I asked him if he'd remembered anything else since Carnavan had had his talk with him.

He shook his head. "It was just as I told your sidekick. Fremont went out, then came back. The second time he wasn't up there more than five minutes. I'm fairly certain of the time because—well, he acted so queerly."

"Anything else?"

"It was quiet last night. No parties, no rough stuff. From the desk I can see everybody who comes into the hotel. Fremont was the last."

"Could anybody come in the back way?"

"To get upstairs they'd have to pass the desk. Ask Jim Ealy. He was in and out all night long."

"I'll do that," I said.

"He's probably down catching some sleep. Can you find his room?"

"I'll try," I told him.

Ealy had a room in the basement. I went down there. My knock wasn't answered. I wondered what Carnavan would do now. I touched the door knob and the door was unlocked and I looked inside.

Jim Ealy was stretched out on top of the bed, only partially dressed. His big, square-toed shoes were lined up on the floor, his coat and vest draped over a chair, his hat on the seat. He had a hole in one sock. His necktie was off, too, but he had another one now—a red one. His throat had been cut from ear to ear.

CAP RAGLAN said, "Let those other boys handle this last killing. You stick to Francie."

"Any luck on Fremont?" I asked.

"None yet," he told me. "A patrolman thought he saw Fremont in a Pike Street joint. He wasn't sure so he called in for a better description. By the time he got back Fremont was gone."

"What about Jim Ealy?"

Cap Raglan leaned forward. "What do you think?"

"Here's something," I said. "The night clerk says that nobody went up after Fremont came down the second time. There's no reason to think he's lying. But he also says that Jim Ealy was in and out all night long. A house dick is like the furniture—the clerk wouldn't pay any attention to him. Jim Ealy could have gone up any time he wanted to."

"Ealy won't ever tell us."

I agreed.

Cap Raglan belched. "That trouble with Carnavan upset my digestion."

I went across the street to Limpy Morgan's. I told myself it was for a beer. But I knew it was in the hope that Carnavan was still there to give me advice. He wasn't.

"He's not here," Limpy Morgan said. He put his fat arms on the counter. "Does he ever feel *anything?*"

"Nobody knows what Carnavan feels," I told him.

I drove down to the rooming house where Fremont lived. It was a big frame building, old but neatly painted, located on a shady side street. I roused the landlady, who was old but not painted, and she told me Fremont hadn't come back.

Maybe he wouldn't be back. I didn't know. Chances were he wouldn't try to skip. That would be a confession of guilt. I didn't know his motive for killing Francie. There were several possibilities, but none could be proven yet. I decided I might as well go upstairs and wait. I got a key from the landlady and I scared her enough so that she wouldn't tip Fremont off.

His room was on the third floor. It turned out I didn't need the key. I'd had too many unlocked doors already today. I got out my Police Positive and pushed open the door.

The blinds were down and the room was in semi-darkness. I couldn't hear a thing. Cautiously, I edged inside. Still no sound. I started to close the door and a man stepped out from behind and something pushed into the middle of my spine.

"Drop the rod, pal," said a lazy voice. "Freeze."

I dropped my gun. I froze.

"For cripes sake!" said Carnavan. "It's you."

His gun went away from my spine. For a moment he stared at me there in the darkness, his yellowish eyes hard and sparkling. Then he crossed to the window and raised the blind a little. He had been drinking. There were tiny beads of sweat on his forehead. My own face was damp, too.

"I figured you might let me down," he said. "I want in on this. He'll be back. Then we'll take him."

"We?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "You aren't any good on this stuff alone."

I asked him if he'd found anything.

"You look," he told me.

I began casing the room. Nothing had been moved out. Carnavan sat at ease, watching me. It seemed like old times again. I did the leg work and he did the thinking. He pulled a fifth of whiskey out of his pocket and tilted the bottle. It was almost empty. He didn't act drunk, though. He never did. He was always superior to any man—and that went for anything that came out of a bottle too.

There wasn't much here, only the few things a single guy needs. The bed looked as if it hadn't been slept in last night. There was a wastebasket with some stuff inside it. On top was a picture in a smashed frame. I fished it out.

It was a picture of Francie.

"You do it?" I asked.

"Why should I?" Carnavan said.

In the bottom of the wastebasket were a lot of torn bits of paper. I got down on my hands and knees and collected them all. There were two kinds of paper, so they were easy to separate. I put them in two piles.

"Have fun," Carnavan told me.

"Sure," I said.

I took the pile of stiffish white paper scraps and began to fit them together. Carnavan chuckled. It didn't take me long.

"What you got?" he asked.

"A torn-up marriage license."

"I'll be damned." He got out of the chair. "Why did he tear it up?"

I worked the puzzle of the other pile of paper. This time it took me longer. I came up with a brief, carefully worded note. I could hear Carnavan breathing gustily into my ear.

The note had been written by Francie. She said that she had already ruined one man's life and she wasn't going to take the chance again. She hoped Tony would forgive her. She was leaving town early in the morning.

I stared at Carnavan and his eyes were blank.

"She's talking about you," I told him.

His eyes came alive. He said, "That ties it. Fremont killed her. She threw him over and he killed her for it."

"It looks good," I said. "He went up last night and tried to talk her out of it. He failed. He went down boiling mad, went

outside, thought it over, then went back up and killed her."

Carnavan laughed. "Go to the head of the class."

We waited. There was nothing else to do. Maybe Fremont would come back and maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he'd be picked up before he had a chance to return here. That was a chance you always have to take.

I said, "Jim Ealy's dead."

He tilted the bottle and drained it. He set it carefully on the floor beside his chair. Then he said, "Yeah? Well, Ealy always was a louse."

"There's something I've known for a long time," I told him. "That time Ealy got kicked off the force. They were going to send him to the pen. You stood up for him and browbeat the commission into kicking him off the force instead."

"Let me tell you something," he said, his eyes bright. "I was raised in a tough neighborhood. My old man beat my old lady every Saturday night, whether she needed it or not. She was soft-hearted, see, and she always forgave him instead of having him thrown in jail. Finally one night he killed her." He threw back his head and began to laugh. "She was soft-hearted and all it bought her was a marble slab." He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "I'm hard and tough because it's the way I want to be. I've got the world by the tail with a downhill pull. I don't give a damn for anybody but Carnavan."

"You helped Ealy out of a spot," I said. "Maybe you never hated Francie."

Carnavan said softly, "You spread any of that around and I'll break your arm."

CHAPTER THREE

"Don't Cry for Me!"

WE BOTH heard the footsteps on the stairs at the same time. They were weary, plodding, uncertain steps. Maybe it was Fremont and maybe it wasn't. Carnavan crossed the room and pulled down the shade again. We waited there in silence. The footsteps tottered toward us, paused outside in the hall. A key fumbled in the unlocked door. Then the door opened and a shaky hand reached for the light switch. Both Carnavan and I had him covered.

He was tall and thin and dark, wearing glasses. Both his hair and his clothing were rumpled. He looked very haggard and very drunk. He saw us and just stared stupidly, not even trying to understand what was happening to him. He looked like just an ordinary nice guy who had been out on a binge.

"You killed her," Carnavan said.

Carnavan's eyes were cold and hard. All you could see was that ice in him. Down inside him somewhere, all emotion had long ago been trapped. You knew that all feeling was frozen inside that icy shell. It was the way he wanted it, the face he wanted to show the world. You knew that he'd loved Francie in his own way.

"What?" asked Fremont vaguely, making an aimless gesture. "I killed somebody?"

Carnavan slapped his gun down on Fremont's head. Fremont gave a small, thin cry and his knees buckled and he fell on his face. Carnavan holstered his gun and searched the fallen man.

"No gun," he said.

I dragged Fremont's limp body down the hall to the bath. Nobody saw us. I pulled off his clothes. There was a shower stall and I turned on the cold water and propped him inside. He choked and began flailing his arms around. I held him there a while, then let him out. His teeth were chattering.

"Francie—dead?" The look in his eyes was still stupid, but he was fairly sober now and he was getting more sober all the time. "No! Don't—"

"She's dead," I told him, tossing him a towel. "Use this."

He let the towel dangle in front of him. Shock was in his eyes now. He shook his head slowly from side to side, telling himself that it was all a nightmare. He couldn't convince himself.

"You can't think I did it," he said, his mouth twisting. "I loved her."

"Men have killed for love before," I said. "Get dressed and you can tell your story down at Headquarters. Look at you. Drunk, sloppy. Where've you been?"

"What would you do?" he asked me. "She promised to marry me. We had the license. Then she wrote me she couldn't do it. I went up to plead with her, but her mind was made up. Wouldn't that make you sore? Wouldn't you maybe go out and

get drunk? My God, I couldn't stand it!"

"It doesn't matter what *I'd* do," I told him. "What matters is what *you* did. You went up to plead with her to change her mind and she turned you away. Okay, that fits. But you went back up fifteen minutes later and killed her. Then you got drunk."

He shook his dark head. "You've got it all wrong. I went back up, but she wouldn't see me. She wouldn't even answer my knock. I came back here and tore up the license and stuff. Then I went out and got drunk."

"Did anybody see you?" I asked. "The second time."

He shook his head.

"The house dick at the Seneca got killed today. His name was Jim Ealy. Maybe he saw you come out of her room."

"I suppose I shot him too?"

"Don't get cagey," I said. "You cut him with a knife."

He tried to sneer. "Who else did I kill?"

"Two is enough. Hurry it up. They'll know the questions to ask you down at Headquarters. They won't railroad you."

His sneer was a little more successful. "The hell they won't!"

Carnavan came inside. "What's taking so long?" he asked me. "You making like a cop?"

We went down and climbed into the car. I slid behind the wheel. Carnavan and Fremont got into the back. Fremont didn't protest. I hauled the car away from the curb and began driving down to Headquarters. At the first north-south arterial I stopped.

"Turn north," Carnavan said.

"Why?"

"Let me do the thinking," he told me. "We're a good team. Don't start getting ideas now. I do the thinking and you do the leg work. That way we crack 'em high, wide and handsome."

"Where are we going?" I asked him.

"Turn north," he said sharply. "I'll show you. I know what I'm doing. I've got to get back on the cops."

I didn't want to turn north. I wanted to drive down to Headquarters. But I'd been taking orders from him for a long time. I couldn't change now. I swung the car around the corner.

"That's right." His voice was lazy again. "I'm a good cop. Hell, I'm the best cop in the world. I'm Carnavan."

"Carnavan!" Fremont gave a strangled shout of surprise. "You're Carnavan? *You* ruined Francie's life!"

"Is that what she told you?" Carnavan asked gently.

"No. But she didn't know. She was all mixed up. You dominated her completely, browbeat her into thinking—"

"Shut up," Carnavan said. "Don't put words into her mouth." He leaned over the seat and said to me, "Stop in the next block."

I did. He walked up the street and into a liquor store. He came out with a bottle wrapped in paper and tucked under one arm. He climbed into the car and told me to get going.

WE REACHED the edge of the lake north of town. Carnavan had taken a couple of quick snorts from the bottle on the way. He'd even offered me a drink, but I'd shaken my head. We reached a side road which led down to the lake's edge, little more than two parallel ruts in the ground. Carnavan told me to take it. I stopped the car in a small, cleared space. All around us were cattails and tulles and marsh grass. There was no sound except the cry of a marsh bird.

Carnavan chuckled. "Remember the trouble we had with neckers down here," he asked, stretching. "A nice, quiet spot."

"I don't like it," I told him. "A confession gained this way won't stand up."

"Nobody's asking you to like it," he said. "Don't you think Fremont is guilty?"

"It looks that way."

"Okay. What happens if we take him to Headquarters? He'll deny everything. We haven't any real proof, no proof that a good lawyer couldn't tear into shreds."

I told him, "Cap Raglan will see that you're kicked clear off the force for this."

He stared at me, his eyes yellow and bright. A little of the look of whiskey was in them now. He shook his head, chuckling.

"No, he won't, pal. None of this will hit the papers. If I crack this case, Cap Raglan will close his eyes to the methods. This fast service will be a boost for his department."

Maybe he was right. I didn't know. I didn't like it, but in the past Carnavan had

done other things I didn't like and we'd come out okay. I just didn't know.

He got out, hauling Fremont to the ground. Fremont's eyes looked dead, uncaring. He even walked quietly beside Carnavan toward a screen made by a clump of marsh grass. Carnavan waved a hand at me before they disappeared behind the screen.

I was glad I couldn't see it. These weren't police methods. These were gangster methods. When you're on the cops a long time, you learn a routine that's hard to break. This wasn't routine. I'd always followed regulations in the same way I'd always followed Carnavan's commands. Both had become a part of me.

I don't know how long it took. Time stood still. I couldn't see what was happening and I didn't want to. I heard Fremont's first cry of pain, and then I shut my ears. I was in a vacuum of my own design, alone with my thoughts. They weren't pretty.

Finally Carnavan appeared. He was almost carrying Fremont. Maybe Fremont had been a man once, but he wasn't now. There weren't many marks on his face, but he was broken. A low moan came from between his cracked lips.

"We've got it," Carnavan said.

Sweat was bright on his forehead. He let Fremont sink to the ground beside the car. Carnavan took a long drink. Fremont sat huddled there, his face in his hands.

"You'll sign a confession of your own free will?" Carnavan asked him, corking the bottle.

Fremont spoke into his hands. "I killed her."

"Why?"

"She wouldn't marry me."

Carnavan said seriously, "This isn't just a stall? You won't change your mind?"

Fremont shook his head.

Carnavan turned to me. "You satisfied?"

"No."

"Okay," he said, spreading his hands. "Maybe I don't blame you. I don't like it either. But I got a confession. You know how I felt about Francie."

"How did you feel about her?"

He looked startled. "You know. You're the only guy who ever looked inside me. Maybe I ought to hate you for it. I loved her."

"I don't see anything inside you," I told him. "There's nothing there to see. You killed her. You killed Jim Ealy."

"We've got Fremont's confession."

"It doesn't mean anything."

His hand slid toward his gun.

"My gun's looking at you over the edge of the door," I said. "Toss your gun into the brush. If you don't, I'll shoot off the top of your head."

He watched me for a fraction of a second, his eyes shrewd and hard. Again time seemed to stand still. The back of my neck was wet. Then he gave me his lazy, loose-lipped grin. His gun made a bright arc into the brush.

"I think you would at that," he said. "How did I do it?"

"You swapped clothes with Ealy," I said, keeping him covered. "The night clerk saw Ealy in and out all night. To him Ealy was just part of the furniture. You're Ealy's build. You shot Francie between the time Fremont left her and the time he came back. That's why she didn't answer him the second time—she was already dead. You killed Ealy because you were afraid he might squawk some time. Besides, you couldn't

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stand having anyone with power over you. It always had to be the other way."

"Why did I kill her?" he asked me.

"She was getting married again," I told him. "You'd lost her, but it's not in you to lose."

He shook his head. "She wasn't marrying Fremont."

"You didn't know that."

"That's right," he said, nodding. "I didn't, did I?"

"You dominated her with your personality," I said. "Just the way you dominated everybody. You convinced her that she was a tramp, that she was no good, that the reason your own marriage failed was her fault alone."

HE SHOOK his head, his big body still relaxed.

"You've always dominated me," I went on. "You've always made me feel pretty no-account. Maybe I could have solved some of these cases you've always taken the credit for."

He smiled. "You're a jerk, pal."

"Let's take Jim Ealy," I said. "You browbeat the commission into letting him off easy. It wasn't because you liked him. It was because you like having people indebted to you. You've always used people. There are others. Me, for example."

"Why not? I'm Carnavan."

I nodded. "But you've been a cop a long time. You've learned what to do and what not to do. You can't help learning those things, and they become a part of you. I've worked with you for a long time. I know how you react. Okay, you're Carnavan. When you took that dough this morning, you were out of character."

"I was, at that," he said.

"It was fast thinking—and that's the trouble with fast thinking," I told him. "Fate alone put you on the case. You didn't want any part of it because you were the murderer. It would be a case you couldn't possibly solve, and that would hurt your ego. If Ealy had mentioned the victim, Cap Raglan would never have sent us along. You counted on that, but Jim Ealy crossed you up. We were sent out on it, and you wanted out. The best way would be to get a suspension."

"Yeah."

"Afterwards you got to worrying. You had to know what was going on. Fremont had to be hooked."

"Can you prove any of this?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "It opens up a new line of investigation. It requires a whole new set of questions. Maybe somebody around the Seneca saw you last night or today. People only answer the questions you ask them. They don't think any further. If the cops hit them with different questions, we may get the answers to those, too."

He wiped sweat from his forehead. "Maybe you're right. I'm not kidding myself. We can't use Fremont's confession?"

I shook my head.

He grinned lopsidedly. "You won't take me in. I know you, pal. You're a jerk and I know what makes you tick. You wouldn't shoot. You'll stay here for half an hour. I'm walking away. A half-hour will give me some time. I'll take my chances on getting away."

"I'll shoot," I warned him.

"No you won't. Not at me. You can't make yourself do it. I know what's in your mind. Maybe you'll want to, but you won't. You'll think: *That's Carnavan. He's the brains and he gives the orders.*"

He took a backward step.

I clamped my lip between my teeth. The gun felt heavy in my hand. I was sweating.

"You don't know what I'm thinking," I told him. "Not any more you don't."

"Don't kid yourself," he said. He turned his back on me and began walking up the road.

I shot him back of the right knee.

He stumbled and fell. I climbed out of the car and went up to him. He sat up. Pain was stitching his face, but he managed to grin. "You win, pal," he said.

"I'll help you to the car," I said.

"No you won't." He shook his head. "I'm Carnavan. I've never needed any help. I don't need any now."

He began crawling toward the car, dragging his leg behind him. I watched him, feeling nothing, caring about nothing, feeling no pain. He pulled himself up and fell into the seat. I helped Fremont inside beside him. Carnavan took a long pull on the whiskey. His thin lips curved into a sneer.

"You're a jerk, pal," he said. "Don't you cry for me."

THE END

COLD TURKEY

I liked Red Connett—friendly, devil-may-care Red Connett. . . . So when it came time to kill him, I was almighty glad to turn the job over to Jasper Smith, the best friend Red would ever have in this world, or —after today—the next!

A FELLOW like me that's been a peace officer nearly thirty years sees many a sad sight. And he sees many a sight, too, that makes him feel living's worth while, and that the people he's serving might be worth the time and effort he gives them.

I was down at the depot yesterday morning waiting for the nine o'clock train, and I noticed Jasper Smith and Marydee and their little boy, Bobby, setting in Jasper's car, just in front of the freight station. I hadn't seen Jasper in a month, and I walked over to talk to him.

"Hey, Sheriff Jasper," I said. "You're off your beat, ain't you? How's everything over your way?"

"Why, all right, Sheriff Turney," he

If ever a man showed plain, cold nerve, Jasper Smith was him.

By
H. L. KIDD

said, grinning and sticking out his hand. "Grundy's quiet enough for me to drive over here to meet Red today."

He got out of his car and we walked out to the edge of the tracks. There never was a better man to work with than Jasper Smith, though he was mighty young to be in his third term as sheriff of Whiteoak County. And there never was a man had more plain courage, either. But I knew it was going to be hard for him to face Red Connett, after six years.

"How's Red been making out, Jasper?" I asked him.

"Pretty well, for a man on the inside, Sheriff. But I kind of dread for Marydee to see him. You know how prison marks a man, and seeing he's her only brother. . . ."

The train whistled, down by the ford, and he went over to his car and got Marydee and Bobby. The three of them went down toward the end of the shed. I thought I'd wait and say a word to Red, seeing I had a considerable hand in sending him up. So I walked back out of the sun and sat down on one of the express wagons, waiting.

The engine rolled by me and came to a grumbling stop a little way up the tracks. In a minute, Old Man Lon MacAllister climbed down from the front coach, and a couple of drummers followed him. Then I noticed Marydee give a little jump and run forward, and Red was out on the cinders with her arms around his neck, Jasper and little Bobby just behind them.

RED CONNETT hadn't changed as much as I'd figured he would. He was still heavy, and the cheap suit of clothes was too short all around and too tight for his big-boned frame. But he held his head up, and when Marydee stepped back from him, laughing and crying at the same time, he reached out a hand to Jasper.

"Hello, boy," he said. "It's been a long time, ain't it?"

Jasper gripped his hand, and for a second they stood there that way. Then Bobby got to wiggling around, and Red let go of Jasper's hand and reached down and swung the boy up on his shoulder.

"Say hello to your uncle," he told him.

The kid put his arms around Red's neck, and I thought it might be a good time to say hello. So I got off the wagon and walked over to them. Red's face had that prison pallor on it, but there was a look in his eyes that was good to see. When he saw me, he held on to the boy with one arm and put his hand out.

"Well, Sheriff Turney," he said, "your bad penny's turned up again."

"None too bad, boy," I told him. "I'm mighty glad to see you! Got any plans?"

"Not right now. But I reckon I'll farm the old place after I get rested up a little. Not that I ain't had every chance to rest—where I been." He kind of half smiled, but his grey eyes looked like twin knife points. "Sheriff," he went on, "you can bet one thing—it's made me know what friends and home really means. I aim to have both, right here where I was born before I'm done!"

"Why, boy, you already got both," I told him. We shook hands again, and I watched the four of them walk around the freight depot toward Jasper's car. Then I went on back to my office. I sat there a while, wondering why I somehow knew Red Connett wasn't going to be fretting us again.

After a while I hit on it—it was the way that boy looked me in the eye, and the solid grip he give me when we shook hands. When a man's had the guts to pay the law's price and still come home to face his friends and neighbors, you're bound to figure he's a better man than most. And that's the way I was feeling about Red Connett. Yet six years ago, I'd of had to admit the only man thought anything at all of him was Jasper Smith.

They had been pretty close for a long time. Jasper told me about it long after Red was sent up.

"Wasn't nothing extraordinary, Sheriff Turney," he said. "My folks moved up to The Cove when I was about fourteen. I started going to Whiteoak Ridge Schoolhouse, and soon as I laid eyes on Marydee Connett, I give you my word I never thought about another girl. One day I got up nerve enough to carry her books for her. And Red didn't like it. So we had a first-rate scrap, and we've been right good friends ever since. You know how it is."

"Yes, sir, I reckon that's what it takes sometimes to clear the air," I told him.

But six years ago Jasper was just in his

first term of sheriffing over in Whiteoak County. And being a friend to Red Connett wasn't the best kind of a recommendation he could have had. Jasper was well liked, though, and folks trusted him to do the right thing. He had one little habit that most folks figured would get him planted sooner or later—he would never carry a gun. And a peace officer without a gun is like a lion with his teeth pulled, seems to me.

Jasper figured it different. "Why, Sheriff," he told me, "there ain't a man in Whiteoak County I can't handle without a gun. And I ain't no killer. So what do I need one for?"

He was right about the first part, anyway. Jasper Smith was only about five-four —a little man—almighty little to be a peace officer. But he weighed around one-sixty, and he was hard as an oak knot.

"All right," I said, "it's your job, and you got to run it. But somebody is going to fill you plumb full of holes one of these days."

Jasper just grinned. "Now take it easy, Sheriff Turney," he said. "You know there ain't many men in these hills would shoot anybody in cold blood. And I ain't going to get folks all upset, waving a pistol in their faces."

At that, he made out mighty well with his notion. And there was plenty of folks wondered how he and Red Connett could have anything in common at all. For where Jasper was quiet and solid, Red was loud-mouthed and a smart alec; and where Jasper had worked his way up to be a county officer at twenty-seven, Red, at twenty-five, was just a plain drifter.

RED WASN'T really bad—he had just never managed to grow up. He was always wild and harum-scarum, and after Old Man Bob Connett died, that wildness got to be a habit with him. And when he got to drinking too much and running with some young fellows that was naturally turned to deviltry, everybody could tell he was fast heading for a rough time.

By then, Jasper was engaged to Marydee, and he was doing all he could to get Red to break off with Jug Bledsoe and Lafe Rondy, a couple no-goods from up back of Brumley. But, no, Red just laughed at what Jasper told him and kept on helling around. It used to get under Jasper's skin, too. He came over here to Cleesville one day to help me check some records, so mad he could have chewed the head off a railroad spike.

"Damn it, Sheriff," he said, handing me a ledger book, "Red is going to run into trouble here in these hills. I'm really right fond of the stubborn fool, but he won't listen to one word I say!"

"You want to watch out folks don't tie you and Red with the same rope," I told him.

"It's a chance I got to take," he snapped. "Red is Marydee's brother. But I'm hoping we can keep him from getting in too deep!"

But Jasper wasn't lucky. For it was inside of two weeks that I was setting in my office here, when *Blam-Blam-Blam!*—three shots echoed out across the square, coming from the direction of the bank. I grabbed my old sawed-off shotgun from behind the door and tore downstairs. But there wasn't nothing left but a cloud of dust rising behind a car streaking up the Sword's Gap road and a bunch of excited folks yelling and rushing around.

John Newton, one of my deputies, come out of the bank, his face white.

"Sheriff Turney," he said, words spilling over themselves, "the bank's been robbed, and Lem Wells is dying!"

That news gave me quite a turn. Lem was my Cousin Ettie's boy. He was a teller there in the bank and as steady a young fellow as ever did a day's work. I knew right then that I wasn't going to have no rest till I'd found whoever shot him. I told John to get on the phone and have all the peace officers he could reach set up road blocks.

"And ring Jasper Smith over at Grundy," I told him. "Tell him I need him over here right away!" Then I ran over to the bank to see if there was anything could be done for Lem.

Someone had got hold of Doc Eames, but it was all over by the time I shoved my way to the teller's cage where Lem was lying, his head in a big spot of darkening blood.

When I turned away, Miz Shane was at my coatsleeve, downright excited.

"Sheriff Turney," she said, speaking in a low, fast whisper, "there's something you'd ought to know, but I don't want to—"

I stopped her right then and there, and led her back away from the crowd. A good

peace officer learns to listen to anything that anybody's got to say. For there's no telling where the tip'll drop from that's going to break your case for you.

"Sheriff," she went on, "I was just outside when it happened, and there was three of them—one outside and the two that was in here!"

Well, I'd already learned that much, but I just let her tell it her own way.

"And when they took out after they shot Lemmie," she said, "I got a chance to see who one of them was!"

"Don't see how you could, Miz Shane," I told her. "Everybody's saying they was well hooded."

"That they was, Sheriff," she said, cackling like an old hen, "but when the outside man run to open the car door, I got a look at his hands. You know anybody with a big moon-shaped scar on the back of his right hand, Sheriff?"

I got excited then. For there wasn't anybody didn't know about the mark Jody Lucas had put on Red Connett in a knife-fight up to the dance at Grundy school.

"Why, hell yes—Red Connett! Begging your pardon, ma'am," I said, "you keep this quiet for now, will you?"

She said she would, and went on out. I really wished I hadn't sent for Jasper Smith. This thing had happened in my country and it was my job. And I figured there was little use in bringing Jasper into it, seeing he was about to marry Red's sister.

I went on over to the office. John Newton was just getting up out of my chair as I walked in.

"We've got 'em boxed," he said. "They can't make it over into Tennessee now, and the folks at Racewell will turn 'em back on Route 37. I figure they'll have to take to the hills, on foot."

"Have you called Jasper Smith yet, John?" I asked him, hoping I'd get no for an answer.

"Sure have," he said, "and he's aiready on his way, I reckon. He's bringing his deputies with him!"

John was right pleased, till I told him what Miz MacFarland had said. He sat there and whistled under his breath.

"Well," he said finally, "I wonder what he will do about it."

And I knew right then that everybody else would be asking the same question. It was a rough deal for Jasper. I told John to go ahead and get the boys ready, and I sat down by the phone.

IN ABOUT an hour John had things all set. He had put Ike Moss and three more of our men in a car and sent them on up the Sword's Gap road to wait for us at the forks. I started checking again with the men on the road blocks. But nobody had sighted the holdup car yet, and I wondered if I'd maybe slipped up. About that time, the door to my office opened, and in walked Jasper and his two deputies, Lee Ransom and Wythe Wilbur. And right with them, pale and nervous but keeping a good hold on herself, was Marydee Connett.

"Oh-oh!" I told myself, "this is too bad! Now how did she find out it was Red?"

But I soon learned that neither she nor Jasper knew that Red had a hand in it. Both were looking mighty worried, though, and when I sent the deputies downstairs with John, Marydee broke down and told me why.

"Sheriff Turney," she said, twisting a handkerchief around between her fingers, "I'm worried about Red. He hasn't been home for two nights now. You don't think he—" She stopped, not knowing just how to ask me.

"She's afraid Red is mixed up in this business somehow, Sheriff," Jasper said. "Maybe you can tell her she's being foolish and make her believe it. I can't!"

That put me on a pretty hard spot. I'd known Marydee since she was a little girl. And I couldn't figure how I was going to tell her that her only brother had come to be a bank robber—and worse. So I stalled around a little and got her calmed down without saying yes or no about Red.

Then I took Jasper in the back office, shut the door and told him the truth. He almost doubted me for a second, but when I told him what Miz MacFarland had seen, I could tell it hit him hard.

"I never thought he'd go that far, Sheriff," he said grimly. "What on earth can I tell Marydee?"

"Well, son," I told him, "you can tell her that this is one case you're going to keep out of. If I'd known it was Red when I told John to call you, I'd—"

That was as far as I got. He came up out of his chair as if he had steel springs in

his legs. His face was white as a sheet, and his voice was trembling.

"Keep out, hell!" he said, low and violent. "What kind of a peace officer do you think I am? I've sworn to do my duty just like you have! Don't you say no more about my keeping out of this thing, for I ain't going to!"

Well, there it was, and nothing I could say would make any difference to him. I admit I didn't press him too hard, because I figured that if we got into the rough country over near the Carolina border I was going to need Jasper Smith bad. For there ain't a man between here and the Big Smokies that knows the hills better than he does.

After a little I went back in the front office and told Marydee that Jasper wanted to see her. I could tell by the look on her face that she knew, and I pitied them both. But mostly I was sorry for Jasper Smith, for I figured he was near to being crucified. Marydee went in, leaving the door open, and I heard Jasper tell her.

"Honey," he said, "I guess it is Red, all right!"

Marydee Connett showed her good hill blood that day. Her voice never quivered when she answered him, but there was a sadness in it that would of tore at your heartstrings.

"I knew it! I knew it all along," she said.

They didn't either one say anything for a minute. Then all of a sudden she realized what he was facing.

"Jasper," she almost whispered. "Oh, darling—you don't have to go after them, do you?"

"I reckon I've got to, Marydee," he told her gently. "It ain't that I want the job—you know that!"

I thought I might better go in and try one more time to talk him out of it. Then I thought about how I'd feel if I was him, and I knew he had to go. So I just stayed still. After a while she spoke again.

"All right, Jasper, I know you have to go," she told him, her voice breaking. "I wouldn't want you to do anything else!" She started sobbing then, and after a few minutes they came out, Jasper with his arm around her shoulders.

"I'll be with you in a few minutes, Sheriff Turney," he said. "I'm taking Marydee over to Cissy Horton's, till we get some news for her." I nodded my head, and they went on out.

WHEN HE came back, he was pretty quiet. We joined John Newton and Jasper's men in the car downstairs, and went by and picked up Doc Eames. And while John was heading north on the Sword's Gap road, I pulled an extra handgun out of my pocket and laid it in Jasper's lap. He handed it right back to me, his face set like a granite rock.

"I ain't never needed a gun yet," he said, "and I ain't starting now!"

"Son—" I told him, and I meant every word of it—"son, the men we're after are killers, and you know it. Take that gun, and when you need it, you use it!"

"Sheriff Turney," he answered, and his voice was cold as ice, "I am sworn to uphold the laws of this land, and I aim to do it. But I have never used a gun. I don't need a gun. And I will be damned if I'm going to go heeled after Marydee's brother!"

He looked out at the hills a while, and at the cloud shadows chasing themselves along the slopes and gullies. Finally he turned around to me again.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff Turney," he said, "but this thing has got me mighty near crazy!"

Well, I could understand how he felt, so I didn't say much. I figured they would ditch their car and hole up in the timber till they thought they could slip across the line and scatter out through the Smokies. And I was hoping we'd get a break that would help us head them off. We did, too, a good deal sooner than I'd figured we would. For as we pulled up at the forks alongside Ike's car, I saw a rider on a white-stockinged roan hitting a clip down the trail from Deer Creek. I could tell by the way he was pushing his horse that there was something on his mind. And I figured maybe we'd better wait and see what he had to say.

He pulled up by the car, and I saw it was Dan Blackman, brother to Ed. The Blackmans had a little shack up on Deer Creek, and they were about as worthless as anybody in Dale County. But this time Dan had something to spill, all right.

He spit down on the ground and caught his breath, and his little weasel eyes run over the bunch of us. Then he leaned down from his saddle toward me.

"You ain't by chance looking for Jug Bledsoe and a couple other fellows, air you?" he asked.

"Maybe, Dan," I told him. "What makes you ask?"

I really didn't have a bit of doubt about what had brought him down from Deer Creek, if he knowed anything about Jug. For Jug Bledsoe and the Blackman boys was blood cousins, yes, but they hated one another's very guts. And there ain't any deeper hate than comes of a family feud. Sure enough, Dan let his lips twist into a crooked half-grin as he answered me.

"Why, nothin' much, Sheriff," he said. "Only I seen three fellers dump a car off'n the bluffs by Beartown slide, maybe a hour ago. When they took out in the timber, one of 'em was limpin' along like that damn clubfoot cousin of mine. And I reckon folks ain't runnin' good cars off'n bluffs in broad daylight jist to see 'em bust up! What they done?"

It was the break I'd been praying for. And while I hated to give Dan any satisfaction, I told him.

"Robbery and murder," I snapped. "You done right to tell me, and I'm obliged. But you better get on back to your place now!"

"Aw, don't mention hit, Sheriff," he sneered, knowing all the time the way every man there felt about the thing he'd done. He reined his horse around and started singlefooting up the slope.

"Damn a man that'll turn in his own blood!" Jasper Smith whispered, half under his breath. "But it had to come!" He turned from looking after Dan.

"I can pretty well guess where they're going now, Sheriff," he said. "They'll cut across Beartown, there back of the slide. And they'll likely hole up in the old Bledsoe place!"

"He's right, Sheriff Turney," Ike Moss cut in. "There ain't nobody been living there since Jug's granddaddy died. I'd near forgot that old place myself."

We piled in the cars and hit for Beartown. Time we got to the slide, it was well past noon. There was a car down at the bottom of the bluffs, all right, and we knew Dan hadn't been foxing us. We left Lee Ransom and Stub Dearing with our cars, in case the fellows we were after doubled back on us. And the rest of us, except Jasper, picked up rifles and headed down the back slope of Beartown toward the river. Jasper came along a little behind us, picking the best trail for Doc Eames, who was carrying the little case he takes along when he's with a posse and swearing like a muleskinner every time he slipped on a loose rock.

WE FOLLOWED the river along the foot of Beartown, figuring to cut up over the ridge and come down on the Bledsoe place from behind. After a while we started climbing for the top, working our way along over the big old limestone boulders. It was hot work. About halfway up, while everybody was taking a little breather, I called Jasper off to one side.

"Jasper," I asked him, "how do you think we ought to try to take them? No use our taking chances—you know that!"

His lips hardly opened as the words came out. "Well," he said, "let's give them a chance to come in without no more bloodshed. I know one thing—Red Connett never aimed to be mixed up in no killing. It's bound to of been Lafe Rondy done it. He always was a coward and a loud-mouth!"

"Maybe so," I agreed, "and I'm willing to give them a break. But you remember this—I'm responsible for these men of mine. And if one of them fellows starts anything, he's going to get it—and I don't care who he is!"

I looked him in the eyes when I said that, too. For I was thinking about Ettie's boy, Lem, back there in the bank. And I figured this wasn't the time for anybody to go soft. But Jasper never dropped that blued-steel gaze of his.

"It's your say!" He shook his head like a bull that's being plagued by flies, and we started up the slope, keeping to the timber.

When we got up on the ridge, I told John Newton to take a couple of the boys and drop back a little. I wanted them to fan out and come in from the west and south, so they could have the sun behind them, if there was any shooting.

"And don't forget, John," I told him, "these fellows have killed one man already. I want you boys to keep under cover. If I fire twice, you get set. And the third time

you hear this old .45, make your rush. And shoot to kill!"

John said he would, and they left us. We waited a while, to give them a chance to get even with us, down below. Then we started easing down through the timber.

The sun was at about the four-thirty mark, maybe a little later, and the woods was pretty quiet. I've been on many a man-hunt in my time, and there ain't no tighter feeling than the one a peace officer gets when he's drawing in on a wanted man, knowing all the time there's a big chance that somebody's going to be carried back with a handkerchief across his face.

Finally we come to the edge of that open place, just above Bledsoe's. We got in behind a couple of old fallen chestnuts, and I asked Jasper if he'd creep a little ways out of the timber and see what he could see.

He was gone a good while. I lost track of him just after he wiggled out from under the blowdown, but I knew he was headed for a bunch of limestone boulders on a knob overlooking Bledsoe's.

Just about the time I was getting ready to send Ike out to see what was holding him, he stood up again. He was right at my gunhand, come in so quiet didn't a one of us know he was there.

I jumped like a scared bullfrog, and Jasper had the grace to grin a second. Then his face settled back into that tight-lipped mask.

"Well, Sheriff, they're there," he said. "The house is gone—seems to of burned a couple months ago. But the barn's standing. It's maybe thirty yards down the slope from them boulders. And I seen somebody take a quick look out of the feedroom window."

Well, that was that. I told Doc Eames to stay in the blowdown till we come back or sent for him.

"All right" Turney," he told me, settling back and lighting a cigarette. "But don't fool around, will you? Miz Lonnie Ferguson is going to be needing me inside of twenty-four hours, and I'll lay two to one it's twins!"

He grinned, and I had to grin back although I wasn't feeling none too happy. Then we left him and made a run for the shelter of the limestone boulders.

I was hoping we'd catch our men napping, but no luck. Them big rocks was in a field of little loose ones. And just as we got up there, Ike Moss had the bad luck to kick a little round one. It went flying down the slope, bouncing and banging along.

I jumped as a bullet whined off one of the big boulders right beside my head, sending little stinging chips of limestone grinding into my cheek.

"Get down!" I yelled, bellying right into the ground.

I rolled over and come up behind a good-sized rock. Will Dedman whanged a warning shot into the feedroom door. I told him to hold his fire a minute, and I hollered down the slope, loud as I could.

"Come on out of there, damn it!" I yelled. My face was bleeding a little where the flying rock had cut it, and my temper wasn't improved none by the sting. "It's Sheriff Turney talking to you fellows now. You're boxed, so throw down them guns and walk out slow!"

There wasn't no answer for a second. Then another slug whistled just over the rock I was in behind, and I figured they was going to fight it out.

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BROMO SELTZER

JUST ABOUT that time I felt somebody roll in beside him. It was Jasper Smith, and he looked like he had made up his mind at last that there wasn't much to be done. But he asked me could he say a word to them first, and I told him to go ahead.

"Hey, Robert!" he yelled, and I remembered Red was named for his daddy. "Robert Connett, it's me—Jasper Smith!"

He got an answer then, floating up the slope in the still air.

"Damn you, Jasper," come the words, "keep out of this! It ain't your play!" There was surprise, and a kind of frantic desperation in Red's voice.

"Listen, Robert," Jasper hollered at him, "you got one chance to come out of this alive! Walk out that door right now—with your hands above your head!"

We could hear the arguing in the feedroom. To give the devil his due, I reckon Red never wanted to do anything so much as give up, right then. But the others was in too deep to back out. Red hollered something, but it was lost in a sudden burst of firing on the far side of the barn.

I heard somebody yell out, and I knew they'd spotted John and his boys. I pulled my gun and fired twice. Believe me, I hated the idea of firing that third shot, for I could feel old Death in the air.

But I never had to call on my men to take the chance. For suddenly Jasper Smith was on his feet, out in front of them limestone rocks, headed down the slope. If ever a man showed plain, cold nerve, Jasper Smith was him. For Death was walking right beside him.

But Jasper never hesitated once, nor broke his stride. And he took the men in the feedroom by surprise, too. Maybe it was the sheer guts he was showing, or maybe they just couldn't take it in that any man, unarmed, would have the nerve to walk right into their guns. But whatever it was, by the time Lafe Rondy flung back the grill over the window and leveled his Winchester, Jasper had covered half the distance to the feedroom door.

I rolled to one side and looked down my sights. But it was no use. Jasper was squarely in the way. He had stopped walking when Lafe showed up at the window, but he still kept his head.

"Throw that gun down, Lafe," he said, without a tremor in his voice. "I ain't armed, and I'm here to take you boys in!"

"No you don't, by God!" Lafe snarled at him. "Gun or no gun, you ain't taking nobody nowheres, damn you!"

"Let's not have no more talk, Lafe," Jasper told him, and you could tell there wasn't a particle of fear in the man. "I'm coming in for you!"

He lowered his head and started forward again, eyes riveted on Lafe.

"No, damn you!" Lafe screamed, and my blood plumb turned to water in my veins. For I knowed Lafe had lost his nerve, and a scared coward is a lot more dangerous than an out-and-out killer.

Lafe throwed the Winchester to his shoulder and fired, and I saw Jasper go down. And as he fell, all hell busted loose inside the feedroom. Slugs ripped through the planking on the barn, and whined off over me and Will and Ike, as we laid there, too far off to do any good.

I saw Lafe's body flinch. He throwed up his hands, and the rifle come spinning through the window onto the ground. A spout of blood gushed out of his forehead, and he fell backward into the feedroom. Then there was three more quick shots, in a drum-like roll, right together. Then everything got quiet.

My heart turned over as I looked down the slope at Jasper Smith. He was up on his feet again, right arm hanging limp by his side. I could make out a slow stain spreading on the shoulder of his shirt. But he moved forward, still with that dogged, stubborn walk. He come to the feedroom door, throwed his left shoulder against it and crashed inside.

We all tore for the barn at once, then. But we might as well of saved our wind and worry.

Lafe Rondy was sprawled in front of the window. I took one quick look at the hole in his forehead, and I knowed we needn't worry about him no longer. Jud Bledsoe was on his side in one corner, hands across his sagging belly. The blood was oozing between his fingers onto the flor. And right in front of me was Jasper Smith, down on one knee, with Red Connett's head resting on his left arm, the blood from the two of them forming a little pool at my feet.

"Fetch Eames!" I yelled at Ike Moss, "and for God's sake, hurry!"

(Continued on page 129)

From across the water, Jarman could hear the man cry: "You not kill me! I do not die! You—"

MAN ON A ROCK

By DEAN OWEN

Moonlight glinted off the spray-wet rocks and sparkled on the sea as Jarman lay there, watching the bald man die . . . and waiting for the lead-inscribed invitation that would soon make him a star boarder at Davy Jones' Hotel!

THE DASH of salt spray against his cheek felt like the touch of a cold hand, and it brought Jarman awake. He rolled over and saw that the sun had slipped beyond Catalina Island, and that a twilight breeze blew steadily in from the sea. The salt air had been so relaxing that he had dozed off in a little hollowed-out place on a rock, and now, as he lifted his head above the parapet he could see that the frothy sea had completely covered the narrow reef that connected the big rock to the shore, fifty yards away.

It would be hours before the tide turned and he could get back across the reef. Jane would miss him for dinner, but she wouldn't worry, he told himself. In spite of his predicament he grinned.

Nothing could be very wrong in the world, for yesterday Dr. Ryerson had said Donna would be all right again. With the help of Ryerson's nurse and his dietician, Snowdon, Donna would soon be well. This sea air was helping, and her sturdy eleven-year-old body was throwing off the effects of the rheumatic fever which had nearly

cost her life, and was now keeping her in Ryerson's Sanitarium.

He fumbled in the pocket of his dungarees for cigarettes, then found he had left them home. Not even his wallet, only a snub-nosed .38 in his hip pocket. Funny, he thought, how a man carries the tools of his profession. Jarman looked mild, like a bookish college professor, but there were tiny wrinkles around his eyes, and his mouth could become hard and set on occasion.

Well, there was some consolation. Jane and Donna could stay here at Palisade this summer and have a real vacation. They had both earned it.

Making a pillow from an old burlap bag that some fisherman had left on the rock, Jarman was about to settle down when he saw a cruiser come poking in among the rocks, a quarter of a mile away. The craft, lifting and settling with the rise and fall of the sea, was a dark blob in the darkness as it headed for a small wharf that jutted out into the restless sea.

A commercial fisher, he reasoned, of some thirty-odd feet, with nets piled in the stern. There seemed to be no one aboard but the pilot at the wheel. The man's powerful shoulders were outlined against the white of the cabin as he tried to warp the craft into the pier.

Coming closer, the boat's motor made a *chug-chugging,* lazy sound in the stillness.

As the craft neared the wharf, a bald man suddenly sprang from the cockpit and leaped at the blocky pilot. When the bald man lashed out with his fists, Jarman could see that loose ropes dangled from each wrist, as if he had been tied and had managed to sever his bonds on some sharp instrument.

The bald man, in broken English, cried, "You not kill me! I do not die! You—"

Lurching aside, the pilot let go the wheel and swung a heavy object at the bald man's head. The bald man went limp as if the life had suddenly run out of his body, and he fell backwards into the sea where the water closed over his head.

Familiar with scenes of violence, Jarman could not even escape them here on this lonely beach. It had all happened so quickly that his sleep-drugged brain had not functioned as it normally would. Cut off from the shore by the rising tide, he had been helpless to interfere. And the distance was too great for his snub-nosed .38.

LASHED to the dock now, the cruiser rode the sea while the pilot ducked into the cabin. He reappeared in a moment. The night was settling so rapidly that Jarman could now barely distinguish the pilot's movements, so he was surprised when something live and lethal screamed against the rock where he crouched. Coral stung his neck.

As he ducked, the crack of a high-powered rifle came clearly to him across the water.

Scowling, he hugged the rock, thankful for the natural parapet that afforded some protection. He realized then that he had come to his hands and knees in that moment of murder. The pilot had seen him.

Three more shots searched the gloom, and each one ricocheted. It would be a waste to try to use his .38 belly gun. That would only give the pilot his location and enable him to use the more accurate rifle to advantage.

Besides, Jarman's gun work had always been at close range. He was no expert marksman, but he would usually try to cripple instead of kill.

In time, the moon appeared over the hills to the east, while below, the lights of Palisade were warm and friendly a couple of miles to the south. But out here he had been a witness to murder, and the killer had seen him and knew his crime had been witnessed.

The palisade rose dark and forbidding beyond the shore line, and on the white sands were the shadows of large boulders. One of the shadows moved and Jarman's nerves tightened.

"He knows I'll wait out here till the tide goes out," Jarman thought. "Then he'll pick me off when I go back over that reef."

The cold spring air cut his flesh when he kicked off his sneakers, dungarees and T-shirt. For a man approaching forty, Jarman was in excellent shape, but it had not been easy. Gym three times a week had done that. Jarman believed that keeping himself in perfect health would cut down the natural hazards of his profession.

Peeled down to his shorts, he took a deep breath, then hit the water, knowing the breakers would drown out the sound of his

movements. Salt and cold stung his flesh as he inched away from the rock.

He dared not use his customary crawl stroke, for the moonlight had spread a silver sheen over the water and the killer, if waiting there on shore, might be able to see his arms lift from the sea.

It was monotonously slow using the side stroke, but finally he could see that he was leaving the rock, paralleling the shore. A half-hour later, he maneuvered himself so that he would not be dashed against the coral, then let a breaker carry him in.

In spite of the danger of attracting the killer, he broke into a hard run to restore circulation, for the wind striking his numb, wet body was icy and relentless.

A mile down the beach, he came to a lighted shack set back against the palisade. In the dim moonlight he could read a sign: *Live Bait. Smoked Fish. Lobsters In Season. Poles For Rent.*

There was a small wharf here projecting out into the sea for a hundred feet. Two rowboats were drawn up on the beach beside a stack of lobster traps.

As he crossed a rickety porch and hammered on the door, he noticed that phone wires led into the building. The door opened and a big, shaggy man eyed Jarman's dripping figure in surprise.

"Had an accident with my boat," he told the man. "Motor conked out and I had to swim for it."

The man grunted suspiciously but said, "Come on in."

By the dim light of a dirty electric bulb, the stranger's face looked leathery and bronzed as if lashed by sea and burned by the sun. His eyes were glittering lines in that face. He wore an old wool shirt and dirty grey trousers.

A big tom cat beside an electric heater gave Jarman a disinterested glance, then went back to sleep. The place smelled of fish. A glass showcase was full of spinners and hooks. On a counter lay a bundle of heavy gut leaders, each with a vicious marlin hook on the end. A rack of poles lined one wall right below a mouldy, stuffed baracuda, a trophy of some forgotten day.

The man had gone into a back room and now he reappeared with a blanket and threw it at Jarman, eyeing him suspiciously.

"So you swum in," he said. "What kind of a outfit you say you had?"

"Cruiser. Twenty-five feet." Jarman put the smelly blanket over his shoulders and shared the heater with the tom cat.

"Weren't no need to swim if she busted down. Throw out your sea anchor, that's what you shoulda done, then you don't drift on the rocks."

"Didn't have one," Jarman answered.

"Feller oughta have one for a thirty footer."

"I'll know better next time."

The stranger's eyes glittered. "Thought you said your outfit was twenty-five feet."

Jarman rubbed his hands before the fire. "Somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. I don't know much about boats."

The man nodded his shaggy head. "That's what I figure. If you'll show we where you left her, we can go out and bring 'er in."

"I imagine it's hit the rocks by this time."

"Tide's goin' out now. She wouldn't break up on the rocks 'less you was in awful close."

"It was pretty close in."

"Man's a fool to git close to shore when he don't know much about handlin' a boat." He turned to a closet and threw out a pair of fishy pants, some boots, and a torn wool shirt. "Put 'em on, then we'll go look for your boat. We'll find pieces of 'er anyhow, if she hit the rocks."

JARMAN slipped into the clothes, and by this time his teeth had quit chattering. The boots felt cold and greasy against his sockless feet. He had sat down in the chair beside the stove to put on his boots, and he stayed there, a welcome rest after his swim in the chill water.

After a moment he said, "Let me use your phone. I want to tell my wife I'm all right. She'll be worried."

"Ain't got no phone," the man said and slipped into an old wind breaker he took off a nail.

Jarman said, "Thought I saw phone wires running in here."

"Nope."

A shrill, clattering sound came from somewhere under the counter. Jarman looked for some change of expression on the stranger's face, but the man's features were immobile. The man, as if regretfully, picked an old desk phone from under the

counter and unhooked the receiver just as the bell rang again.

" 'Lo", he said into the phone. "Yeah, this is Burke, Mr. Snowdon. . . . I didn't mean to say your name over the phone. . . . Sorry. . . . Nobody here but some guy who says his boat went sour. . . . Yeah, he swum for it. . . . No, I ain't seen Mike. . . . I'm gittin' worried, too. . . . All right, Mr. Snow—I mean, all right."

He replaced the receiver, stared worriedly out the window into the darkness, then put the instrument beneath the counter.

"Folks are always wantin' to use my phone," Burke explained. "That's why I say I ain't got a phone."

"I'll be glad to pay you—later. I don't have any money with me now."

Burke shook his shaggy head as he studied Jarman's face. "I ain't quite sure about you," he said. "Some fellers been stealin' my lobster traps. Maybe you're one of 'em."

Curiously, Jarman said, "Why would I be stealing lobster traps? Do I look like the kind of a man who—"

"Can't never tell about a feller's looks," Burke said. "You look like a bank clerk or maybe a feller who sells books. But maybe looks are deceivin'."

Jarman secretly smiled at this, wondering what Burke would say if he knew how true that statement was.

"You mentioned somebody named Snowdon over the phone," Jarman said.

"You was mistaken."

"That's an uncommon name. I know a Snowdon. Works at Ryerson's Sanitarium at Palisade. He's a dietician."

Burke said, "You better hike for town."

Just then, the door opened and Jarman, sitting in the chair behind the counter, saw a pair of wet trouser legs through the glass showcase.

The newcomer said breathlessly, "Burke, you seen a guy runnin' around with no clothes? I had him trapped on the rock. I waited for the tide to go out, then I went after him. But he was gone. I found his clothes."

There was a blue-steel automatic in Burke's hairy hand when he turned, and he shoved the muzzle against Jarman's side.

"Who's that?" the newcomer asked, pointing at Jarman.

Jarman got a glimpse of a short, stocky man carrying a rifle. Then he was herded into a windowless room that nauseated him with its overpowering odor of fish. The door was locked on him.

Through the door he could hear Burke's angry voice. "Now what the hell you have this guy trapped on the rock for, Mike?"

Mike said, "It was on account of Palsky. He thought he was bringin' in silk. He found out what it really was an' got scared. Said he was only doin' it because his wife was goin' to have another baby and he needed the money—"

Burke said roughly, "What'd you do with Palsky?"

"I had him tied up, but just when I headed for the wharf, Palsky gits loose and I hit him over the head with a wrench and he goes overboard."

"He dead?"

"He never come up."

"Why didn't you kill him out to sea, Mike? You goin' stupid?"

"I didn't want to kill him without tellin' you or Snowdon."

"You ain't used your brains, Mike. Now what about the guy on the rock? He see you do it?"

"Yeah. I tried to pick him off with the rifle, but he ducked."

Burke said, "Find anything in his clothes?"

"Nothin' but this."

"Huh! A belly gun. What's a guy layin' out on a rock without nothin' on him to show who he is, carryin' a belly gun. What about that, Mike? Don't that look like maybe somebody's tryin' to cut in on our business?"

"Maybe so, Burke. You take care of him. I'll get the stuff."

Burke said angrily, "You mean you left the stuff there?"

"Don't worry, I hid it in the rocks."

"Look, Mike, you get the stuff first, after this. We're in this to make money and we ain't goin' to make it by leavin' the stuff around where somebody else can grab it."

Mike said, "But I was worried about this guy."

"You ain't goin' to worry no more. You go get the stuff, Mike."

Jarman heard Mike leave, then waited for Burke's next move. The room in which they had locked him was stout, he had seen that. And a few tentative nudges at the

door with his shoulder told him he wouldn't get out that way.

HE DIDN'T know how much later it was, but a car drove up outside, a door opened, closed, and then heavy footsteps sounded on the porch. The shack door opened, and a man's voice said, "Let's hurry it up, Burke. Mike come in yet?"

"Mike's gone to get the stuff."

"Good. I'll wait. This is our first time and I hope everything goes right."

Burke said, "We might as well be settlin' up while we're waitin'."

"We'll wait till Mike gets here with the stuff."

"Okay, Mr. Snowdon." Burke cleared his throat, then told Snowdon about Palsky's murder, witnessed by Jarman.

Snowdon swore. "Why is it, every time a man gets in a deal like this, there's always a brainless one to ruin it."

"It ain't ruined, Mr. Snowdon. Nobody's goin' to know."

"You mean—"

Burke laughed. "Sure. I got him locked up."

"Well, let's take a look at him."

When the door was unlocked, Jarman walked into the room under the muzzle of Burke's gun. Snowdon leaned on the counter, and now he straightened, his lean face reddening in the glow from the dirty electric bulb.

"You!" he said.

Burke's shaggy head swiveled as he glanced at Jarman, then back to Snowdon. "You know this feller?" he asked in surprise.

Snowdon nodded. "His daughter's a patient at Dr. Ryerson's."

Burke scowled. "That ain't good. If he's got dough enough to go to Doc Ryerson's maybe he's somebody important."

"Doc Ryerson has what he calls his charity cases, too," the man said with a leer.

Ill at ease in the bulky clothes, Jarman said, "I'm surprised to find you here, Snowdon. I see your position as dietician at Ryerson's gives you time to . . . indulge in other activities."

"That's nicely put. Jarman's the name, isn't it? I remember. I made a chart for your daughter."

A thin line of sweat began to show on Burke's forehead, glistening beneath his shaggy hair. "Who is this guy? What's he do?"

"I don't know that," Snowdon answered. "I could find out from the records. I know where he's staying but nothing else."

Burke said, "Mike found a belly gun where he was hidin' on the rock. There wasn't no identification, nothin' in his clothes."

"A gun," Snowdon mused, "and no identification." He smiled crookedly. "Dr. Ryerson is very democratic. He accepts cases from *all* types of people." After a moment in which he studied Jarman's face, he said, "Why the gun?"

"I'm afraid that's my business."

"You had no identification. No wallet."

"I forgot it."

"Palisade is a quiet place," Snowdon went on. "A man wishing to avoid the L.A. police might hide out here."

"He might," Jarman answered.

"Just what is your business, Jarman?"

"You mentioned the L.A. police. Ask them."

Burke and Snowdon exchanged glances, then turned back to Jarman. Snowdon said, "I see."

Burke scowled. "But this guy don't look like a crook. . . ."

"Types only run true in the films. You can never tell in real life. I'm interested in a man who will hide on a rock, forgetting his identification, but *not* forgetting to carry a gun."

Burke said, "How're we goin' to trust this guy?"

"I think we can trust him."

Jarman smiled. "Going to cut me in on the deal?"

Snowdon shook his head. "No. There will be too much money involved as soon as things run smoothly. We have to split now with our contact man on the ship, with Burke here—and, of course I get my cut."

"What about Mike?"

"I'm coming to that," Snowdon replied.

"And Ryerson—does he know anything about this?"

"The good doctor is too busy effecting cures to notice what takes place under his nose. He's much too interested in seeing that your eleven-year-old daughter, Mr. Jarman, recovers from her nearly fatal siege of rheumatic fever."

Jarman's hand trembled when he stroked

his jaw, but he said, "I see you remember the case."

"Yes. She's a very pretty little girl and could, in time, grow to be a beautiful woman—if she lives."

THAT WAS the test, Jarman knew. Anger was a sweeping red glow that enveloped him, but before it could touch his brain and thus destroy his reason, he fought it down. For years he had practiced self-control; you had to in his business, or you didn't live long. He had faced some tough men in his time, men who did their reasoning with a gun.

Watch it, he cautioned himself. *Wait for the break. There'll be a break. There always is, if you keep your head. Just keep cool.*

"What do you mean?" Jarman asked, "*if* she lives?"

"Dr. Ryerson has prescribed rest and quiet for your daughter. Donna, I believe is her name. Rheumatic fever weakens the heart. He feels that in time she will reeover completely. But any shock now might be fatal. I could create that shock, easily." He paused, then said slowly. "Do you follow me?"

Jarman nodded, the muscles of his face aching with the tension. For a moment his anger sprang to the surface when he said, "I don't want any part of your dope racket."

Snowdon nodded. "I see you know about us, then."

"It's obvious you're meeting a ship at sea—probably from the Orient. Somebody slips the dope aboard Mike's fishing boat. He brings it in. You sell it to some of Dr. Ryerson's wealthy patients." A nice little business.

"I see you have a clear picture. And now that you're one of us, it is only fair to tell you that I am sparing your life only because we do not know your background and there's no time to investigate right now."

Burke stared across the dimly lighted store at Snowdon. "How you figure to keep him from talkin'?"

"Easily. Mike has bungled things up for us. He killed Palsky before a witness. No one will miss Mike, but somebody might miss Mr. Jarman there. I think we'll get rid of Mike. After that, Burke, you'll meet the ship. There were too many of us in the deal, anyway."

It took Burke a moment to grasp the idea. He gave a short laugh, then sobered. "You ain't goin' to trust Jarman with a gun—"

"When Mike returns with the stuff, I'll engage him in conversation," Snowdon told Jarman, ignoring Burke. "His back will be to you." Snowdon glanced around the dingy store and his eyes lighted on a heavy tire iron, leaning against the wall. "That's handy to pry abalones loose from the rocks, but we'll put it to other use. Understand, Mr. Jarman?"

"I understand."

Burke said, "But what if Jarman don't hit him hard enough? Mike's a pretty big guy. . . ."

"Jarman will make sure of his job; he'll be thinking about his daughter when he hits him."

"Yeah," Burke said. "But I still don't get it."

Snowdon said with a tight smile, "To quote a cliché, if we hang, we'll all hang together. Eh, Mr. Jarman? There'll be Jarman's prints on the tire iron. We'll see that they stay there. He'll be in this as deep as anybody."

Burke scowled. "Ain't we had enough killin'? Palsky ain't goin' to be easy to explain."

Snowdon showed his exasperation. "Mike will be dumped in the ocean. We'll cut the cruiser loose and let it smash up on the rocks. Mike and Palsky were drunk and were battered to death on the rocks in trying to dock. That's all."

Burke said, "I don't like wreckin' that cruiser."

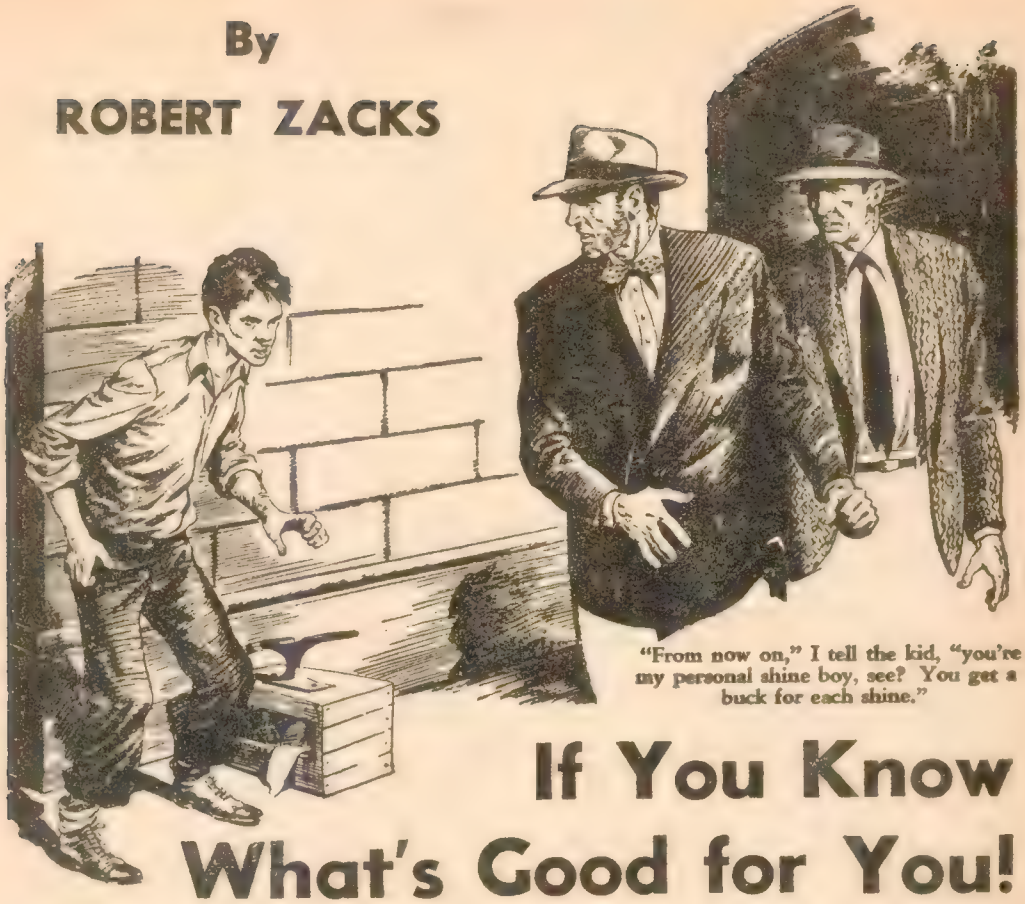
"You've got another," Snowdon said quickly. "Don't forget what your cut in this is going to be."

WHILE waiting for Mike's return, Jarman lifted the bundle of gut leaders he had seen when he first entered. He raised them absently, letting the vicious hooks dangle against the glass show case top. Snowdon was looking out the window, trying to spot Mike. Burke watched the hooks, and even the Tom cat woke up at the *clinking* sound made by the heavy metal hooks.

(Continued on page 130)

By

ROBERT ZACKS



"From now on," I tell the kid, "you're my personal shine boy, see? You get a buck for each shine."

If You Know What's Good for You!

"Copper or no copper," Riley said, "you better get that guy, or they'll be pickin' you up off the street—piece by piece!"

DON'T MAKE any mistake about it, see! I may be here in stir, but it took more than a cop to put me here. No copper was ever smart enough—not even that guy they sneaked into the mob.

The whole town was ours—you oughta know that. We even had our slot machines in the candy stores. And what a slick machine we had: Maggo Riley running the discipline squad for the boys who forgot who was boss; Joe Finafio handling collections and payoffs; and that slick guy with the fancy maners, Barton King, taking care of the fix. And the way those reform mayors beat their brains out against our juries! Cripes, we really had those jurymen scared!

Who took care of it? Well, I ain't saying. Even now there're things I'm buttonin' my lip on.

Sure, the mob's broken now. Those damn income tax guys. But they'd never have gotten me. Why, when that cop was put into the mob I was suspicious right away!

Oh, he did a good job all right. One of our hoods found him hiding in Flo Moran's apartment, all shaky and nervous. Said he was wanted in Chicago. We checked with our contacts, and he was. I was still suspicious, but Maggo told me to shut up and break him in.

Well, one of the reasons I was suspicious, I was taking him down to South Cortland Street to show him our numbers game hideouts. One of them bootblacks yells

out about how I need a shine. I didn't need one. I'd just had one. Them little chiselers! So I pushed his face in a little—you know, just a little roughing up.

Well, this new guy—he used the name Leo Gomak—right away he says very sore, "For cryin' out loud, the kid didn't do nothin'."

The kid glares at me and lets loose a string of curses—boy, it really was something! He wasn't crying or anything, just sore, his face white and his eyes shiny.

I says to Leo, "I don't need no shine and the kid knows it. Anyway, you don't have to be worried about him. He can take care of himself."

Leo is burning but he shuts up. Suddenly the kid heaves his shoeshine box at me. It nearly broke my arm.

"Why you—" I hollered. Boy, that arm hurt. I chased the kid and caught him. For about five minutes I held him and slapped his face around, with Leo watching, not daring to stop me.

Well, would you believe it, that kid didn't let out a yip? So help me! He just looked at me and took it and tried to bite my hand when it hit his face. I let him go when his nose started to bleed.

"Kid," I said, "you got guts. I like a guy with guts. Here." I handed the kid a five-spot and he tore it up and threw it at me. I grabbed him by the arm.

"You want more?" I said. I grabbed a handful of his hair. "Here's five bucks. Take it!" I gave him another five-spot. He took it. He knew what was good for him.

"From now on," I said, "you're my personal shine boy, see? You get a buck for each shine."

The kid wipes his eyes. He looks at me. He's poor. His clothes look like hell. And money talks. "A buck," he says. "Okay, you louse."

He ducks away from my hand, and I keep walking with Leo. I was laughing. Some day we could use a kid like that.

"Kind of tender-hearted, ain't you?" I said to Leo. "A kid needs a good sockin' around once in a while. Teaches him whose boss. Don't worry, those dollar bills will take his pain away. Some day he'll be in the mob."

Leo didn't say anything. What made me suspicious right then was I got the feeling he was sorry he'd said anything. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me he was too soft to be what he seemed.

I reported it to Maggo, and Maggo told me to act as if everything was okay and he'd make a double check personally. Leo was already wise to the numbers-game layout, so we kept him in that division and away from slot machines, horse racing, beer, and anything else he might be interested in if he was a plant.

MEANWHILE, the kid and I got along fine. At first he was sore at me, but the dough helped and I let him become a runner for the numbers racket. He was my personal shine boy and he learned fast. He was careful not to be a wise guy and did as he was told. I was even surprised how willing he was.

Then the report comes through that Leo is a cop.

"See?" I yelled at Maggo. "And you shut me up. Next time, listen to me. I ain't do dumb."

"You're very smart," said Maggo. Maggo wasn't even excited. "You get rid of him. It's your reward for being so smart."

I looked at Maggo. Maggo's eyes are a funny grey. Like a cold winter day. I get sick whenever he looks straight at me. I didn't like it, but I knew what was good for me.

"Okay," I said. "I'll get him."

"You'd better," said Maggo. I got a chill up and down my back. Maggo didn't like me. I was too smart. I'd been a wise guy. He didn't like guys that said "Next time, listen to me."

I walked out before he got even madder. Anything could happen with that guy. I started looking for Leo. He had disappeared completely. I got scared. I checked his hotel. He had checked out. I called Maggo.

"He's wise," I said. "He's skipped. Somebody's tipped him off we were checking him again."

"I wonder who?" said Maggo coldly.

"Listen," I yelled. "Just remember it was me was suspicious first."

"Maybe you were covering," said Maggo coolly. "Funny you were the only one got suspicious. What do you know that we don't know? What contacts you got that we haven't?"

The blood rushed to my head. "Listen,"

I whispered. I was really scared. "Listen, I swear—"

"You better get that guy," said Maggo. "If you know what's good for you. You wouldn't want be picked up on the street —piece by piece, would you?" Even on the phone I felt those grey eyes.

I went out in a sweat. I went to the nearest bar, had a stiff drink, then made a beeline to Flo Moran's place. Sure enough she was packing like mad. Her husband was in stir and due for a parole. She'd been working with Leo. When she saw me she screamed.

I closed the door behind me. "Talk," I said. "I won't lay a finger on you if you talk. Joe can even get out and go away with you for all I care. Where can I find that copper?"

She told me. I slugged her and tied her up. Leo was in a certain building talking to cops and secret service men. He would have to leave that building. That's where I would come in.

I searched around for the kid bootblack. "Where we goin'?" he asked, staring me straight in the eyes.

"Shut up. Don't ask questions. I want a shine."

"Well, why do we—"

"I said *shut up!*" He shut up and came along. I stood against the wall near where Leo would be coming out and opened a newspaper and started reading so that my face was hidden. "Start shining," I said. "And don't stop."

The kid looked up at me puzzled. "Listen," he said, "What the hell's goin' on here, anyway?"

I pulled out my automatic. "Start shining," I said softly. "And if you know what's good for you, don't stop. You get what I mean?"

The kid paled. He started shining, steadily. I hid my face in the newspaper and peeked through a tiny rip I tore in it. Leo wouldn't be suspicious just seeing a fellow getting a shine. Not even him. I made damn sure I felt the kid's shine cloth moving steadily over my shoes, to keep his hands busy, once he'd put on the black polish.

Leo came out of the building. The kid polished my shoes steadily. Leo came closer. Then before I could do anything, Leo looked my way, stared at my shoes in surprise and shot at me through his pocket, getting me through the shoulder. I didn't have a chance.

You know what that damn kid had done? He'd gone and polished my black shoes with white polish. They stood out like a headlight, giving him the extra few seconds he needed. Can you beat it? After all I did for that kid!

It's a hell of a note!

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TOO MUCH

By JOHN LAWRENCE

CHAPTER ONE

A Little Knowledge . . .

SHE HAD on a yellow jersey dress that nursed every sweet curve.

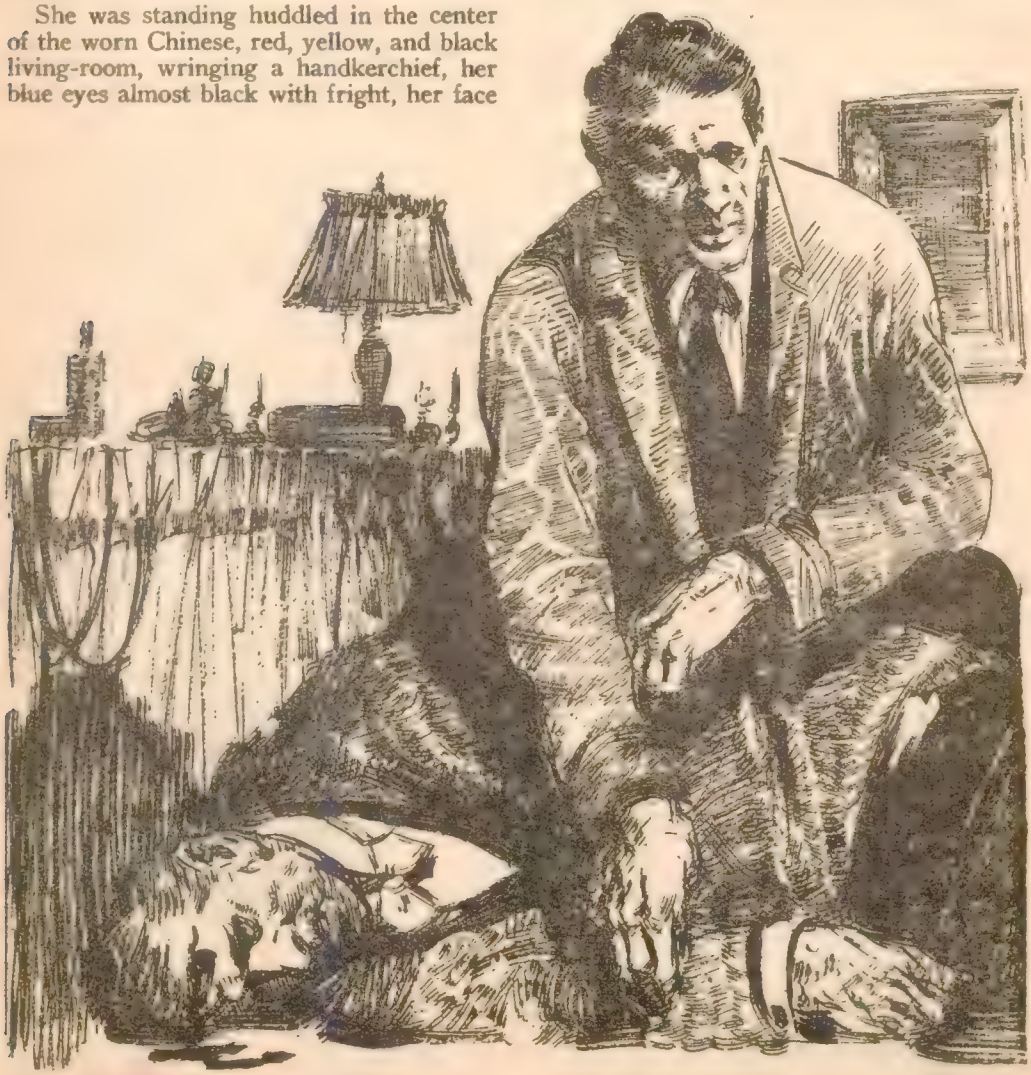
There was nothing I could do to stop the swift pinch, the quivering that jumped up inside me.

She was standing huddled in the center of the worn Chinese, red, yellow, and black living-room, wringing a handkerchief, her blue eyes almost black with fright, her face a white blur against her rippling black hair. She whispered, "Oh, Danny."

I came in, closing the door. "Well, hello." My effort at a smile didn't quite come off.

It died in my teeth when she choked out, "Oh, Danny, I—it's Frank."

She bit the handkerchief corner in her



YAKETY-YAK!

Smashing Novelette of Sudden Death

"You don't have a thing to worry about, baby," I told that sweet little, cute little, two-timing little wife of mine. "If Frankie is alive—he'll kill you.... And if he's dead— what do you think his brother and his friends will do to you?"

"Danny," she said, "you're sort of a detective—you won't let the police—"

trembling mouth, then said in a whispered rush, "He—he tried to beat me up, Danny—to to hurt me—maybe worse."

It jabbed me. I couldn't help it. I made my voice calm. "Well, what did you expect—taking up with a racket guy. You'll probably get plenty of that."

She shook her head to make me stop. "Danny, you don't understand. Danny, listen—I—I *did* something to him."

I squinted. "Eh? What?"

She ran to me, pressed her forehead on my chest, clutched my arms, oblivious to my dripping trenchcoat and hat. "Danny, he—he came in and—and started yelling at me—grabbed me and started shaking me. He was like a wild man—his face all white. He swore awfully at me, tried to make me say what I'd said to Mrs. Follis about the accident. I—I ran to the desk—he frightened me so—and got the pistol you gave me—" Her voice was rising in a wail. "I turned and he—he slapped me, and then—then it went off. He clapped his hand to his head—like this—and fell down. The blood was coming through his fingers—" She burst into frantic sobs. "Oh, I—I killed him, Danny! He's dead!"

I felt as though the floor had dropped six inches under me.

"I went nearly mad—till I thought of you. . . ."

"Well, what did you do with him? Where is he now?"

"I—I dragged him in there—" She threw an arm wildly behind her.

I swung away, opened the door and went into the cream-and-blue bedroom. It took me a moment to see him.

Frank Delatorre lay in the shadow of the cream enamel bed, on the aquamarine rug. Dinner jacket and belted camel's hair coat were twisted under him. His long face with its cleft chin and wire-thin blond moustache had always looked wooden, handsome, English—and harsh. Now he resembled something chipped out of lead-colored granite. Blood had run from the hole in his left temple, down his cheek and into his collar, and dried there. He had gone down with his eyes closed.

I dropped down, snatched at his cold, sodden wrist.

She sobbed behind me, "I—I couldn't lift him any—any further. Danny—what will the police—"

I let go of his cold wrist and stood up, scarcely hearing her. My mind was a confused riot.

Her frantic eyes shuttled from one of mine to the other. "Danny! Danny! Don't look at me like that! You—you look frightened. Danny, you're sort of a detective—you won't let the police—"

I mouthed, "Yeah, yeah," while my brains went round in a circle. The little bird-brain didn't even see the hole she'd dug for herself. Police? Police were the least of our worries.

I started to turn away. There was nothing to turn to. I swung back, wiped sweating palms on my thighs, finally went down again and slid my fingers deep into Frank Delatorre's neck.

My nerves jumped. Was there a faint pulse beating, deep within? Or was it just my prayerful wishing?

I dug my fingers deep. There was. There wasn't. There was. I sweated, I couldn't tell if there was faint beating or not.

"Get Frankie's doctor over here—fast," I threw at her. "What's his name—Alberti."

She stumbled back, gasping. "But he's dead!"

"Maybe he isn't."

She moaned, her hands flying to her cheeks. "But he *can't* not be dead! He can't! Oh, God, he'll kill me—he'll kill me!"

"And if he's dead—*what do you think his brother and his friends will do to you?*"

I shouldn't have said it so callously. Her mouth opened to scream as the thought sank into her little addle-brain. I said bitterly, "You're a racket girl now. Remember? *Get to that phone!*"

She whimpered, stumbled against the wall, then turned and ran out, sobbing. I could hear her sobbing and choking as she made the call.

PERHAPS your woman is perfect. Perhaps she has intelligence, beauty and charm. All right. You're lucky.

For eighteen months I'd lived in a frenzy with mine. Half the time I was crazy happy—half the time out of my mind with her fluffs. She could leave more gas jets, pressure cookers and electric irons going while she shopped than a pyromaniac. She could lose jewelry, money, forget important mes-

sages, ignore dates, run up bills, lose my clothes. I had once caught her indignantly ordering the man in the apartment below us out of the place, under the impression that it was our cubicle.

Not all the time. She wasn't pathological—just hare-brained in spurts. But over the year and a half since I had coaxed her out of the ticket booth at the Bijou, all these things had happened. It was one long feverish chain of explosions. And loving someone so hard that your bones ache is a handicap. Maybe if I'd walloped her, it would have been the answer.

Or maybe if I'd had dough. I'd have had the time and patience then to cope with her. But an investigator for the Jeweler's Association keeps no income-tax collectors up night. I did plenty of overtime—all I could get. I was out after the bucks. She was like a kid, needing attention constantly. Things popped when she didn't get it and started feeling sorry for herself. I could take just so much and then I'd blow my top. Quarrels, tears, arguments, exasperation. . . .

And she still wrung my heart out, made me ache with wanting her, just to look at her. In the seven months since she'd gone, I'd thought I'd got a shell around me. When she left, after a bitter bawling-out, I'd thought she'd gone to her mother's. Then the lawyer's letter had come. I'd shrugged that off—until I'd heard that she'd been seen around with Frank Delatorre.

That tore it. I went after the divorce with both hands. Frank Delatorre was a real racket guy—if you like racket guys. Black market, night clubs and hot furs were his regular line. He was handsome, and he had, of course, folding money to spread around.

That he was as treacherous as a snake, that he was almost pathologically sensitive to a double-cross—being himself an expert at it—that he had bought the death of a score of people whom he had even slightly suspected of crossing him—all this wouldn't have meant anything to her if I'd explained it. She probably wouldn't have believed it. I had told myself feverishly that the faster I got clear of her the better, because something was bound to happen—something not good.

Well, it had happened. And I was just as nuts about her as the first day I saw her. It was just one of those things you can't shake off. All I could think of was that I couldn't take her in my arms, touch her soft, milk-white throat and warm, moist lips, till I got her out of this—somehow. This couldn't happen to her. She was special, precious, irreplaceable—and irresponsible. It couldn't be. I had to find her an out. The alternative was unthinkable—and that's the way it was. I know it doesn't make sense.

I couldn't find the pulse again in the man's neck . . . couldn't tell. . . .

I heard her hang up the phone. She came hurrying back. I stood up, wiping my hands, went out and blocked her in the living room, closing the door behind me.

She froze with her hands to her cheeks, whimpered, "I'm going to call the police—give myself up. Then Fred Delatorre and Frank's friends can't get me—or Frank either if he's still—"

"And just *what* are you going to tell the cops?" I said through tight jaws. I spotted rye and seltzer on a table. "Make us a couple of drinks. There's talking to be done." She made them with shaking hands. "Now drink yours down." When she had gulped and choked it into her, I said, "Sit there and calm down. What's your story?"

She swallowed, her eyes tear-stained and torn. "It started when he—Frank—came in. He was all excited. He—he asked me if I'd been discussing the accident with Mrs. Follis. . . ."

"Wait a minute. What accident?"

"It—it was hardly anything. I can't imagine why Frank was so sensitive. It was the day we drove out to Jersey—my last birthday."

"Go on."

"We went to the Mabinoqua Inn—it's one of Frank's roadhouses."

"I know, I know."

"Well—we went there for lunch in a car. Frank had to see somebody on business and then we drove back. And on the way back he ran into Mr. Follis."

"Ran into . . . ? How? Where?"

"Oh, I don't just know where. In the country—outside Weehawken, I think. Mr. Follis was riding a bicycle and we came around a bend and there he was, and Frank couldn't swerve aside in time and he knocked him off his bicycle."

"And?"

"Why—nothing. Mr. Follis's head was

cut a little and he was shaken up, but he was awfully nice about it. He—he said he wasn't hurt at all. But Frank insisted on taking him home in the car and he phoned for Dr. Alberti to come right over."

"All the way from New York?"

"Yes, and the man said it was unnecessary and his wife—she was awfully nice—they both said we were making a big fuss about nothing, and that we mustn't worry ourselves. So we came on—Frank had to hurry to see a man at the Canary Club—and he put me in a taxi when we got there and sent me home. That's all there was to it."

MY FOREHEAD was knotted. It meant nothing.

"What made Frank break out about it tonight?"

"I—I don't know. He—somebody'd told him about my going to lunch with Mrs. Follis. Not that we so much as mentioned the accident—I don't think we did, anyway."

"Mrs. Follis? The wife of the man you hit?"

"The widow, yes. She moved into town last week. I just happened to run into her on the street and helped her buy a mink coat."

"Wait a minute! Widow? You mean this Follis is dead?"

"Why, of course. He died suddenly, a month or so after the accident."

"What of? How did he die?"

She swallowed. "She—she said he had some sort of a heart attack and—and just didn't come out of it. So she sold the farm and came into town. She was lonesome out there. She didn't know anybody here. I happened to meet her on the street. I was just having lunch with her occasionally—not often, because she drinks too much."

There had to be something. I shook it up, tilted it this way and that. I reshuffled it, cut it, turned it over—and then it came. I jumped to my feet.

"The thirtieth of April—your birthday—six months ago! That was the date?"

"Yes, I told—"

"Look: You must think hard: This car he took you to Jersey in—was it his own car?"

"I—I don't know. He and Fred have two or three. I hadn't *seen* this one before. . . ."

"Was it—now close your eyes and concentrate—was it a maroon Buick, about 1942, a Victoria model, with two extra tires set in fender wells? It had brown upholstery. . . ."

"Yes, yes. I remember the upholstery!" She clapped her hands.

"Keep thinking hard. When you got to the club—the Canary Club here in town, I mean—did Frank get out with you? Or did he stay in the car?"

"Why—why, we both got out. There was one of Frank's boys there, I think, who got in and drove the car to the—well, to the garage, I suppose."

I breathed, "Great balls of fire!"

It was like hitting a slot-machine jackpot.

On that day six months ago—I remembered it at the time because it was her birthday—at five in the afternoon, a red Buick had been jumped by five federal agents within two blocks of the Canary Club. The driver—in whose name the car was registered—had run for it, and had gone down under a shower of lead. In the luggage compartment over a hundred thousand dollars worth of heroin had been found.

Frank Delatorre had driven that load of dynamite in from Jersey—with Sylvia along to lend innocence!

But that wasn't the half of it. Not now it wasn't—now that this had come to light.

While he was transporting it from one state to another—*while he was committing a felony*—he had run down an innocent man. And the man had died. Had it been of a heart attack? Within a month of the accident? It shrieked out loud, now. Heart trouble, the death certificate had said, the death certificate that had been signed in all probability by Frankie's own doctor, Alberti—his nephew or something. Heart trouble—resulting from the accident.

And the accident had occurred during the commission of a felony! Legally, that turned the accident upside down—turned it into pure and simple murder! In the eyes of the Law, Frank Delatorre had murdered Follis as surely as though he'd shot him to death!

And now the farmer's widow had turned up, prosperous, buying mink coats—on Broadway. Oh, brother!

And here was Sylvia, carrying this pack-

age of T.N.T. around in her pretty little irresponsible head. I made Frank Delatorre a mental bow; he really must have been as crazy about Sylvia as I was, to permit her to live even a day with that knowledge.

It was almost in my heart to feel sorry for him. It must have been like a shot of electricity in the pants to find those two loose-hinged females wandering around Broadway together, inevitably airing the whole matter in public. No wonder he had charged in on Sylvia and thrown a winging.

CHAPTER TWO

Lead Buttons for His Suit

SHE PUT a hand on my arm. "What is it, Dan? You—you look queer."

I turned to her. "It's plenty—if I can figure how to use it. Now listen: As soon as the doc's been here—no matter *how* Frank is—you're going straight to the Francis Hotel and register as Mary Dolan. Got that? Good. Then you're to do this:

"You're to take a pen and paper and write down everything you've just told me, and then mail it immediately—in the hotel's mail chute—to my office. Now repeat it. What are you going to do?"

She choked it out breathlessly. "But, Danny—what does it mean? Why . . . ?"

"It means we've got a chance, something to beat Frank off with, anyway—if he lives."

I went back and opened the bedroom door, glanced down again.

It was like a jab in the solar plexus.

She said, behind me, as I dived for the window. "What . . . ?" Then she almost screamed. "Oh, my God—he's gone! Danny, look! His handprint . . . on the bureau . . . on the windowsill!"

Rain beat down on me as I stared out down the fire escape. It was dark and shining in the swirling night. Nothing moved.

I jerked my head in, sideswiping drenched curtains, set my teeth. "Baby—move! You've got two minutes to get out of here."

"But—but why did he go away?" she wailed. "Why did—"

"Maybe he felt he wasn't wanted here," I said grimly. "Go on—get your things."

"But—but—"

"Oh, lady," I almost shouted at her, "will you, for God's sake, do what I say! The minute Frank makes it to a telephone, his gorillas will be tearing up the town for you, and they'll start here!"

She started running around in frantic circles, whipped together hat, coat and purse, moaning. "Oh, what shall I do? What shall I d—"

"Just what I said. Get out of here and go to the Francis. Register under Mary Dolan and wait there till I come."

"But you—what are you—"

"I'll wait and intercept the doctor. Then I'll have to see Frank's brother, Fred Delatorre, and try to talk sense to him."

She whimpered and flew.

As we slid out the door into the hall finally, there wasn't any more circulation in my veins than a turnip.

The two long, silent flights of stairs were a breathless hour.

I checked her, dry-eyed and feverish in the dim little street-level vestibule. "Hold it a minute," I whispered.

I slipped out, my hand tight on the gun in my pocket. The storm had swept the narrow street almost clean of people.

Not quite.

Half a block west, in one of New York's few alleys, there were lights flashing through the rain. A small crowd was huddled around the alley entrance. Two police cars stood slantwise at the mouth of the alley and, even as I looked, the low snarl of a siren brought a squat vehicle whirling round the corner beyond.

I shivered all over. It wasn't an ambulance. It was the morgue wagon.

I set my teeth. It didn't *have* to be Frank.

I reached back and caught her hot little hand, hurried her out, turning her away in the opposite direction. I walked her hard, fearful lest she glance back.

She stammered, "Danny, wait—not so fast. . . ."

I swung her round the first corner, then slowed a little and, as a taxi rumbled in from Sixth, beckoned it in.

"Don't forget," I said quickly. "The Francis—Mary Dolan. And open your door to nobody but me. Got it?"

"Yes, yes."

"And the first thing you do is write everything out—the whole story of that trip to Jersey six months ago—and get it in the mailbox! Don't forget that. Everything depends on it!"

"Yes, but oh, Danny—I'm so frightened."

I jerked open the cab door. "You'll be all right. You've nothing to worry about if you do as I say," I lied. "I'll take care of the rest."

She turned and flung herself in my arms, pressed a hot, salty wet kiss on my lips and jumped in.

I gave the cabby the address and he shot away.

I stood almost where I was for maybe five minutes—and then a slightly aged but sleek Cadillac sedan squeaked suddenly as it came abreast of me and stopped.

I said, "Doc—thank heaven," and ran around to get in beside him.

HE WAS a clean-looking, roly-poly blond youngster with grave brown eyes. He must have been thirty-odd, but he looked like a college footballer. "Where is he?" he asked.

I stalled. "Drive ahead—left at the corner," while I tried hastily to estimate how close his feeling would be for Frank Delatorre. All I could seem to remember was that Frank had set him up—on Broadway. And chased away some of his boys who wanted to slip him their shady medical affairs.

Then we were around the corner. He looked ahead and said something under his breath. His eyes came sharply to my face. There was nothing to do but say:

"I'm damned well afraid he's up there, in that alley. I'll explain later. Better pull up and get the score for sure."

He gave me another swift glance, then sent the big car ahead. A uniformed copper was standing in the roadway, gesturing us onward emphatically, but we slid to a stop beside him.

"Hello, Chris," Alberti's gentle voice said. "What goes?"

"Oh, it's you, Doc. This'll be bad news for you. Your uncle, Frank Delatorre, got it—shot in the head. He's dead."

"Thanks, Chris," Alberti said.

We drove on, turned north on Seventh. "And now?" Alberti said softly.

"Your office, I guess."

We neither of us spoke till we had reached his building, ridden six floors, and turned into his tiny suite of offices hung with theatrical photographs.

By then, I estimated, Sylvia would be sitting down, pen in hand, in the Francis Hotel—if she hadn't forgotten about it.

There was no receptionist, and we walked through into a dim consulting room. There was a stack of what looked like financial statements, letters and invoices strewn around the walnut desk. I could see the white trappings of a small surgery through an open door beyond.

"Wait till I tell the girl where I am," he said, and phoned. Then he bent, took a bottle of Scotch and two glasses from a lower drawer, slid them over to me. His eyes were steady on my face as I poured a drink.

"Did you kill him?" he asked finally.

"No. Nothing like that."

"Did Sylvia?"

"Of course not." I had to gamble. "She called me about an hour ago. She came home and found Frank stretched out, a .22 hole in his head. She thought he was dead and went off her rocker a little. I came and thought he was dead, too. We left him in the bedroom while we phoned you and when we went back in, he'd powdered down the fire escape. Not knowing who might have done it, or whether Sylvia was in danger, I felt it best to get her out of there till I could get the score."

He said nothing, kept his grave eyes on me.

I said finally, "Doc—you were pretty fond of Frank, weren't you?"

He looked at his clasped, sensitive hands. "You can say that again," he said softly. "Frank paid my way through medical school and set me up in practise here, four years ago. The money I was able to pay back. The rest, I'll never—could never—repay."

"If someone—" I began, and then stopped. "Wait—you paid him back the money he'd put out . . . ? Practise must be pretty good on Broadway if it only took you four years to—"

He moved his hand at the pile of papers. "Luck. I treated a grateful patient who happens to know things about the stock market. I've made a packet on his tips, as

it-happens. Don't get any ideas that I've been cutting medical corners. Believe it or not, Frank made a fetish of my keeping clean."

"Except for him."

His eyes impaled me. "For anybody."

"Of course, there was Follis."

His eyes got hard. "Follis died of heart failure."

"It says here. In small print."

He said nothing.

"Give me the truth on Follis' death and I can finger who shot Frank."

He looked at me steadily, his eyes a little dull. "Who do you think you're kidding, Danny?"

I finished my Scotch and stood up. My face was cold. "You—"

A phone rang in the outer office. He picked up the cradle set in front of him, said, "Hello." Then, as the ringing did not abate outside, he hung up, muttered, "Excuse me—other line," got up and went out and held a long medical conversation with a Dr. Turner.

I crooked my neck round, took a quick look at the topmost papers. He was leveling about the stock market anyway. There were four monthly statements from Enderby, Throttle & Co., stockbrokers. At the beginning of the first month, he had had a balance of twenty-one thousand dollars odd. The four long sheets recorded a great number of transactions. Evidently his practise was slow, to give him the time for this. But the final balance was just over one hundred and ten thousand dollars.

When he came back in, I finished my sentence: "You think I killed him, don't you?"

"You?" he said gently. "No. That really hadn't occurred to me seriously."

"Who, then?"

He shrugged. "I'm not a detective, Danny."

Finally, I shrugged. "All right, Doc. Will you do this much? Will you forget that we called you tonight?"

He let himself slowly down into the swivel chair, a line in his clean forehead. "Well—I won't lie for you, Danny. But I'll wait till somebody asks me. That's all I'll promise."

"Fair enough." I put more satisfaction in it than I felt. "You won't be sorry. Thanks, Doc."

I HAD a hollow feeling in my stomach as I walked slowly out of the building. I hesitated, looking north to where a yellow neon sign said *Canary Club*. I sweated as I thought of facing the surviving Delatorre, Fred.

Excuse me, Fred, old man—I just came to apologise for my wife. She killed your brother Frank. Naughty of her, but I know you'll overlook it. She's promised never to do it again. . . .

I licked my dry lips, sloshed on through the wet. There was absolutely nothing else to do. With the dumbly worshipping, gorilla-like Fred now sitting in Frank's saddle, Sylvia's life wasn't worth a pinch of salt, as things stood. Even in jail. *Especially* in jail. The Delatorres had 'connections.'

When I was thirty yards from the plastic and chromium entrance to the club, there was a swift pad of wet footsteps behind me, and a black-gloved hand fell on my arm. "Danny."

I turned, quivering. I faced the round, weather-pink cheeks and searching chinaberry eyes of Lieutenant McColl, Broadway's dictator. "Working, Danny?"

"No. Just got through."

"Frank Delatorre is dead."

I was being roped by an expert. I took no chances. "I know. I just heard it," I said. "I tried to get Sylvia, but her phone doesn't answer. I was just going in here."

"They want you downtown."

"Take it easy, Marty. Let me see Fred Delatorre first."

His eyes widened momentarily. He shook his head. "Not all over my nice, clean Broadway."

"I didn't kill him. Chances are that I have an alibi—when I find out when he died. But let me see Fred a minute—and I may have an angle on who killed him."

"Dan-ny!" It was a reproach.

"I know, I know," I said irritably. "You've got it all figured out. But I mind a time, once, when even the Broadway Squad got something wrong. What the hell? I'm not fool enough to run. I'll be out in fifteen minutes. I can't help you any more now than then—and I may be able to crack something. What can you lose?"

He took a minute to make up his shrewd mind.

"All right. I'll give you exactly fifteen

minutes. If you cross me—I won't like it, Danny. I just won't like it."

"I won't cross you. I'll meet you here in fifteen minutes."

He nodded and I turned into the gaudy sucker-trap.

The club was on the second floor. The broad street entrance showed only wide, carpeted stairs yawning between glass cases of stills of the floor show. Mulberry carpet led upwards in easy stages—three steps, then a miniature landing, three more, and so forth. The stairs turned to the left, halfway up.

A tall brunette with nice legs, too much make-up and a short mink jacket over a slinky black satin dress, almost fell on me at the turning. She had pretty black eyes, but they were a little glassy now, and she had to close one to peer at me. Her tiny, purple velvet choir-girl's hat was perched in the middle of her bunned black hair. She nodded so emphatically that the hat rode forward over one eyebrow. She giggled, pawed for it.

The club was comfortably filled. I nodded at Verna, the cuddly little checkroom girl at the top of the stairs, and looked round for Leo. You saw Leo if you wanted to see anybody else.

Verna had her blonde mop hung over the counter, yelling, "Timmy!" for the page. I went up the three broad steps to the mouth of the supper room. It was dim, lush, gay with chatter. The band was momentarily silent.

Behind me, I heard Verna tell the uniformed Timmy, "That stewed jane that just went out—Follis, her name is. Run and give her these rubbers."

I choked, whirled round as the youth trotted down the lower stairs.

I ran down after him, caught him at the street level, eying the rain sourly. I braved the elements, backed out and tried to spot her from the roadway, searching the crowds in both directions. She was gone.

"No dice," I told the mulberry-clad stripling. "If she comes back—let me know."

"Right," he said dully.

I SAW Leo when I got back up—a dark man with very sparse mouse hair and a shoe-button nose—emerging from the washroom. He had plum-blue eyes that looked as though he used mascara around their sockets. He managed to look as though he had been born with a dirty face in a dinner jacket.

His eyes jumped when he saw me and he turned away, beckoning a captain.

I caught up to him. "Never mind blowing any whistles. I'm here to see Fred."

He looked me over with dull eyes. "You know where the office is."

I went up and circled the bandstand, found the small door just short of the kitchens, went into the tiny hall and knocked on the door at the left. I could hear shouted words inside. The door swung inwards on an electric switch and I caught the closing snatch of a phone conversation; ". . . winged her? Okay. Forget the thing for now. No, the cops'll— No! Let her go another day."

Fine sweat covered my skin.

Two thugs burst into the hall behind me, crowded after me as I pushed into the modernistic office. I faced Fred Delatorre sitting, and a white-haired stringbean of a baby-faced youth, standing. Delatorre stuck a cigar in his mouth and crouched over the desk, his eyes hot and dry.

"Well?" he snarled, after the moment of sensation my appearance caused had passed.

"I want to see you alone."

His eyes narrowed. He looked up at Baby-face. Baby-face shrugged, examined his polished fingernails.

"Awright," Fred Delatorre said. "You guys wait in the hall."

You could tell he was Frank's brother by the black shining eyes and kinky tow hair. But this one's head and body were shapeless, running to fat, and sloppy—none of Frank's lithe suavity. Fire burned in his cheeks.

"An'?" he barked when the door closed.

"Do I gather that you know where Sylvia is?"

His breath whistled. "We know, all right. So what?"

"What are you going to do about her?"

"Are you kiddin'?"

"You think she shot Frank?"

"Think? He gets a phone call, hits the ceiling, goes outa here sayin' he's gonna whale the tar outa her—and all of a sudden he's dead."

"He had it coming. She doesn't under-

stand that stuff. She went into a panic, grabbed up a little gun and plugged him. She was off her head with fear. It was self-defense."

He swore wildly. "Self-defense! Little gun! Who do you think you're kidding? The little tramp just stood there and poured it into him. She even grouped her shots. You could put a half-buck over all three of them .44 holes—and any one of them would have cooked him."

I couldn't locate my voice. I croaked, ".44's?"

"That's right."

"Then she didn't do it! Listen, Fred, as God is my witness, I *know* she shot him just once—with a .22. I *know* that."

"You do?" His lips curled over his dirty teeth. "Well, ain't that—"

Then his hot eyes started to swell. He jumped to his feet. "You! You dirty heel! I must be nuts not to have—" He jammed a splayed finger on a pearl button, worked it. The door swished open behind me. He didn't take his blazing eyes from mine. "Take this cork-soaker out and give him lead buttons for his—" His eyes flicked—and he almost strangled.

He slumped down, a sickly smile on his thick features. "Uh-hello, Loo-tenant. Uh—just a little kiddin'—among friends."

"Yeah," Marty McColl's scratchy little voice said. "I know how it is." He hesitated, while the cold sweat had a chance to dry on me. "Well, Danny, your fifteen minutes are up. I figured you might have forgotten our appointment. Ready?"

"Yeah," I said.

I walked out quivering, with four pairs of eyes burning holes in me. No one dared stir a muscle. Marty McColl had Broadway well in his small, black-gloved hands.

He said nothing while we walked through the now noisy club, down the stairs and onto the wet sidewalk again. Then his shrewd china-blue eyes squinted at me. "You see what I mean?"

I said, "Marty, whether you believe it or not, I just found out for sure—Sylvia didn't kill him."

For a second, little pinpoints of fire jumped in his eyes. "Willie the Actor?" he shot—and then, as my blank look told him I didn't react to that one, his eyes faded. "I got no idea *who*—yet," I mumbled.

"Well, come along." He indicated a low-slung Packard sedan at the curb.

Two-spot McMahon, the camera-eye of the Broadway Squad was in the driver's seat. He reached a hand outside to open the door as we came across the sidewalk.

I stopped dead. "Marty—wait!" Belated light flooded in on me. Willie the Actor! The white-haired dandy I had seen inside! And he was out on bail now on a narcotics charge! "Wait—I've got to think, Marty."

"Always good for a laugh," he nodded approvingly. "You can do it on the way up to the Francis."

CHAPTER THREE

Hurry Up and Die!

I ALMOST didn't get it. They were coming too fast. Halfway into the car, I jerked back, bumping my head. "The—the Francis?" I gulped feebly.

He edged me into the car. "Yeah. Things have developed since I saw you. We just got the flash. Your wife's holed up there. Didn't you know? She's—uh—picking up the business fairly fast."

"Business?"

"The Delatorre type. She got winged in the arm—nothing serious—a half-hour ago, up on Seventy-second. Switching cabs and things to duck the torpedoes who were after her, she also ducked the prowlies—until just now. They tracked her to the Francis, where she'd got a doctor for herself. She seems to have the doc up in her room, holding a rod on him, and threatening to plug him if anybody breaks into her room. Somehow, we thought of you."

"Good God! All right. I think I can handle—" and then I wondered giddily if I could. With tonight's terror—now doubled by being attacked—superimposed on her normally powder-puff little mind, God only knew what reaction I'd get from her.

We turned a corner and squealed to a stop before the Francis—a dingy, squeezed sandstone on Madison. Police cars were around. As we went up the old-fashioned double-steps to the stoop, I saw the glint of brass and blue in the lobby.

It was just as we stepped over the threshold that light bannered across my mind, as though I'd been slugged. I stopped dead in

my tracks, choking, "Mrs. Follis!"

McColl eyed me owlishly, his hands tight in his Chesterfield pockets.

I grabbed his arm. "Look," I said, "send somebody to round up this woman—" I gave him as good a description as I could. "She left the Canary Club just as I went in. She was corned to the ears. Verna, the checkroom girl there, knew her by name—might know where to find her."

"And that makes her?"

"A woman who did some business with Frank five months ago—business that will interest you strangely. Get your hands on her, and the job's done."

His lips curled thinly. "Oh? It isn't done now? All right, Danny. I'll give you every break. Two-spot, will you see if you can exhume this female?"

"Right."

We rode up in the rickety elevator to the eighth floor.

"It seems," McColl finished, "that your wife came in here, phoned from the lobby and then checked in. When the doctor she'd phoned arrived and went to her room, she called down and told the clerk that if anybody tried to get into her room, she'd plug him. Naturally, the clerk yelled for the prowl-car boys—who were cruising the street out front, as it happens, looking for her."

"And now she's got you stymied—unless you want this doctor shot?"

"Would you say that?" he asked mildly. "How many shifts per day can she put on? But, of course, we'd like to clean it up right away."

The hotel was one of the few that still ran their own furnaces. The unseasonable September rain had caught them with a full head of steam on. The further up we went, the hotter it got—and the smellier.

Two plainclothes men took their backs off the wall at the corner of the eighth-floor corridor.

"Anything new?" McColl asked, and got negative head-shakes.

He nodded at me. I stepped in front of the door, clearing my throat. One of the dicks jumped and dragged me aside. He pointed to a piece of sticking-plaster on his neck and a pock-mark in the mustard-colored plaster across the angle. "To one side, bub, is safer."

I stood to one side and called, in what I hoped was a soothing voice, "Sylvia—it's Danny."

It seemed minutes before she made a sound like a sob. Then: "Go away—I never want to see you again. You sent me to be shot!" My heart squirmed.

I said, "Baby—don't be silly. I'm the only one you can count on. You know that. I want—"

"Count on? Yes! Count on to hate me—to want to revenge yourself because I left you. It's no use—I see everything now."

I wiped sweat and rain from my neck. McColl's eyes met mine somberly. "You see what I mean?"

I thought a minute. "Where's the manager?"

When the little hump-backed, bald-headed man limped out on a cane, I asked quickly, "Have you got some apparatus for lowering painters or such to work on the face of the building? A trestle? Or a bucket seat on a block and fall? Well, get it up to the roof. And if you've got a spare cane . . .? Good."

"Is this trip really necessary?" McColl demurred as we went up. "She might plug you through the window."

I couldn't very well tell him the truth: That my brains were so fevered up with wanting her that getting her out of the mess was all that meant anything. She could plug me if she wanted to—just so I got to her. I just growled, "Maybe," as we emerged onto the roof in the pelting rain. Three dicks were settling the shaky bucket-seat arrangement at the roof-edge. "Just let me find the window open, that's all I ask. It should be, with the heat they've got on inside."

It was.

Skip the crazy, swaying, two-story descent in my sketchy rope-and-canvas bucket seat—holding myself off the wall with the rubber-tipped cane the manager had supplied. I jerked down past the blurred double glass of the top half of the wide-open window of her room—and then I had a grip on the stone fretwork at the side and was easing to my knees on the windowsill.

The doctor saw me—she had called Alberti, of course—and his Adam's apple bobbed wildly. But he never took his eyes from her face. She had him sitting in a chair directly facing her, close enough so that she could extend her bandaged arm

to him. His case and instruments were on the floor beside a little basin of pink-stained steaming water. As I teetered, he said earnestly:

". . . greatest danger from a gunshot wound is lockjaw, Sylvia. You must have an anti-tetanus shot."

She had the little .22 pointed straight at his chest. "Not now. When they go away," she said breathlessly.

"But they're not *going* away. . . ."

I poked the cane inside and slashed. I hated to do it, but I had to. I whacked her wrist aside. The gun barked once and another bullet bit the woodwork on the door —and then I was diving, scrambling on top of her, carrying her to the ground, the chair toppling over on top of us. I scrambled over her and snatched up the gun.

SHE was screaming, lashing around on the floor. I hastily unbuckled the harness of the bucket seat that still clung to me, flung it out the window. I hunkered down, scooped her up in my arms. She writhed, screaming. The doctor hastily righted the chair for me as I slapped her face, hard, three times, then sank down in the chair with her in my arms.

"Take it easy, baby," I said hoarsely. "Everything's all right. There, there—don't worry. Nothing's going to happen to you. There, there—" and so on.

Finally, she subsided into body-wracking sobs, her face against my chest. "Oh, Danny, Danny—they'll kill—"

"Sssh." I rocked her gently. "Danny'll look after you."

Alberti scratched his blond head. "I wish the Garrick family would get themselves another physician after this," he said wearily. "Do you want her to have this shot?"

"Presently." I nodded at the banging door. "Let the law in first."

He went over and threw the bolt—and was instantly swept back, stumbling—to plop down on the bed, as McColl and his retinue poured in. The dapper little Broadway lieutenant took the scene in at a glance, relaxed.

"Very nice, Danny," his velvety voice said. "Now—if you don't mind—we'll all take a ride downtown."

I eyed him warily as Sylvia tightened convulsively in my arms. "You can afford a couple of minutes," I said. "I'd like to get a few things straight in your mind before we worry about downtown."

"Such as?"

"That Sylvia didn't kill Frank."

His face got a little wooden. "Now, Danny."

"This Willie the Actor that we ran into —is he working for the Delatorres?"

"He better hadn't be. No, his connections are in Albany."

"He was a friend of Frank's, however."

"I guess."

"Do you remember the thirtieth of April —six months ago?"

A line of irritation appeared between his eyebrows. "Now, look—"

"On that date—the thirtieth of April—a red Buick Victoria was buzzed by the Feds, very close to the Canary Club. It happened late in the afternoon. The driver was killed trying to get away. The Buick was loaded with H."

"What of it?"

"Frank Delatorre had stepped out of that car five minutes previously. He'd driven the junk down from his roadhouse in Jersey."

His eyebrows squeezed together. "You're trying to tell me Frankie's mob were peddling dope on my Broadway?"

"I don't know if they were peddling it—or where. I do know he drove it down here from Jersey. Maybe it was for a friend—this Willie the Actor, for instance. Maybe anything. My point is that he committed a felony by driving it down."

"If you can prove it."

"He got the stuff at the Mabinoqua. A little digging there should prove it easily enough. Now—you tell *me:* If a party, during the commission of a felony, accidentally kills an innocent man, what is he guilty of?"

"Murder in the first, of course. Hell, Danny, quit the Quiz Kids act. . . ."

"Frank Delatorre ran down—and caused the death of—a man during his trip here."

"Now, wait a minute!" The youngish Alberti sat up indignantly.

His brown eyes flashed fire. "Just because Frank's dead, you aren't going to load him with crimes!"

I waved him to silence. "It's no use, Doc. I'll get an exhumation order on Follis, if necessary." He tried to stare me down, but his eyes finally wavered, went down

to the still-loaded hypo in his sensitive fingers.

"Wait a minute," McColl said irritably. "You're trying to tell me Frank was shot tonight, because of that load of hop he drove six months ago?"

"No, I wouldn't say that."

"Then why? Because he killed this Follis?"

"Not exactly that, either. He was killed for money."

"Eh? Damn it, you can be exasperating, Danny."

"Give me a chance. I'm tossing this together myself. Here's what I see: Frank got caught over a barrel because he ran down this guy named Follis. He was too smart an operator not to recognize the spot he was in. He did everything possible to make sure this Follis didn't get anything serious wrong with him, but it didn't work. Evidently there were internal injuries or something. Follis died within a month after the accident—and Frank's nephew here, Alberti, made out a certificate reading heart-attack."

"Danny!" Alberti blurted.

"Sorry, Doc. I can't spare you now. So, directly after Follis died, his widow showed up on Broadway, buying mink coats and slamming around night clubs. That spells a payoff—a payoff for a quit-claim. A chunk of money to prevent any questions being raised about that heart-attack. A payoff to the dead man's wife.

"And that payoff is the heart of the matter. Frankie, having a crook's mentality, naturally shied away from making it personally. He'd have to send an agent."

"Who?" McColl asked.

"Well, let's see. There was one man who already knew the whole score, as things stood. Or he could get somebody else—somebody who knew nothing about it. That, of course, would put Frank's neck in still a third party's hands—counting the widow as one. It doesn't sound as though he'd do that, does it?"

"Well, who was the party who already knew the score?"

I looked over at Alberti. He flushed, shot an oblique look at McColl, like a small boy caught stealing jam. "All right," he said stiffly. "So I gave her a sum of money and got the quit-claim. There's nothing illegal about that, is there?"

McColl said, "Well, it isn't murder, anyway—and that's what we're investigating. Come on, Danny, belch what you've got, if anything. I'm still waiting to hear about Frank's being killed for money."

I said. "My guess would be that he was killed for something like twenty thousand dollars. . . ."

The phone on the wall burst into strident ringing. McColl growled, swung, and answered it. "Yeah?" He listened for a minute, covered the mouthpiece and looked at me. "It's Two-spot. He's got that woman—that Mrs. Follis—at the Fifty-Eighth Street Hotel."

"Good. Tell him to ask her this: How much did she get for the quit-claim?"

"I can tell you that," Alberti said wearily. "I can show you Frank's check to me for it, too—thirty thousand dollars."

"Ask *her*," I insisted.

"She may not tell you," Alberti explained. "She was warned never to tell anybody anything. Tell her that *I* said that was the figure and that it was all right for her to talk."

McColl turned back to the phone, mumbled, turned again and said, "That's right."

I felt blood rush to my face. "But it *can't* be," I expostulated. "That's too high. That—"

And then I got it.

I SAID, "Great balls of fire!" Then: "Just hold her on the wire a minute. You're really going to like *this*, Lieutenant. I said he was killed for twenty G's. That was a guess, but now I'll bet my eyes that that was practically the exact figure."

I looked at Alberti. "You wouldn't kill Frank for twenty G's, would you?"

"Hardly."

"Would you kill him—him a guy ultrasensitive to the slightest suspicion of a double-cross—would you kill him to prevent his finding you'd *already clipped* him for twenty G's?"

He flushed. "In view of the fact that I have no need for twenty thousand dollars—from Frank or anybody else—I'll hardly answer that question."

"I know. You made over a hundred thousand on the stock market, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"*I* always wanted to play the stock market," I said. "I think I could beat it."

"Well, why don't you, then?" Alberti's good humor finally snapped.

"Because *I* could never lay my hands on twenty thousand dollars capital," I said. "Lieutenant, have Two-spot ask Mrs. Follis *when* she got that thirty G's. Ask her, just for fun, if she didn't get, say, ten thousand, months ago when she signed that quit-claim and then, unexpectedly, when she showed up on Broadway recently, the other twenty. . . ."

I tried a snap-shot at Alberti's arm. I saw his sleeve twitch.

I was too late.

He was as steady as a rock, and a faint smile came on his lips as he took the hypodermic—the plunger now depressed and the cylinder empty—from under his coat sleeve.

McColl was yelling at the phone. Sylvia, in my arms, had screamed, was threshing wildly, scared by the gunshot. The two detectives had their guns out, looking wildly around, waiting to be told whom to shoot.

"Forget it," I bawled over the hubbub. "He's hypo'd himself." Not till then did it dawn on me that he'd intended that dose for Sylvia, and I added, "the rat. Get an emergency squad here from Bellevue—if you want to save him for the chair."

Alberti shook his head sadly. "Too late. It'll work quicker than you could find out what I used."

There was a sudden silence as McColl pronged the telephone.

I said to Alberti, "Now I'm guessing that your mistake was in *giving* the dizzy dame that extra twenty G's."

He nodded dreamily. "That's right. It was an error of judgment. I panicked a little—thought I had her talked into taking a long trip somewhere. Instead, she decided to stay here and spend it on booze. So—I was as badly off whether I did or didn't. Once she'd hooked up with that dizzy wife of yours, it was bound to spill out sooner or later—and get to Frank's ears, if I continued to hold out."

"Which it did tonight?"

"Frankly, I don't know. But it was imminent. When I got down to the Village tonight—just a few minutes after she called me, I met Frank just outside the building. He was half out of his head, but he was mumbling about these dames spreading the yarn all over Broadway. I knew time was running out on me. He was already shot and I—well, I got him up that alley and tried to ensure *my* living."

McColl shot sharply. "You're admitting you killed him?"

"Yes, yes. I have the gun in my pocket here."

I stood up, Sylvia sobbing in my arms. "I'm taking her out of here. It ought to be clear now. He thought—at first—that thirty G's was too much, held out twenty, took it to market and—over the past four months—made a fortune. Then, when Mrs. Follis popped up here in his back yard, so to speak, he pushed the other twenty at her, trying to get her out of town. But she didn't go, and she babbled, as he feared she would. Frank Delatorre caught wise to enough to start him putting his nose deeper into it—or anyway Alberti thought he was about to, in which case Alberti's number would be up, but good. . . ."

"All right." McColl grumbled. "We're not exactly illiterate."

"Then will you phone Fred Delatorre and get him to call his pack off my wife?"

He nodded.

I flagged the crippled hotel manager as we reached the hall. Sylvia sighed, her warm, moist lips pressed in my neck. "I want to go home," she whispered.

"I want a room," I told the manager, "but quick. I'm not going on the streets till the town gets a chance to cool off."

Sylvia pulled her nose out of my neck just long enough to add, "Make it a double room."

THE END

THERE'S MURDER IN THE AIR!

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Fare for the Meat Wagon

By CURT HAMLIN

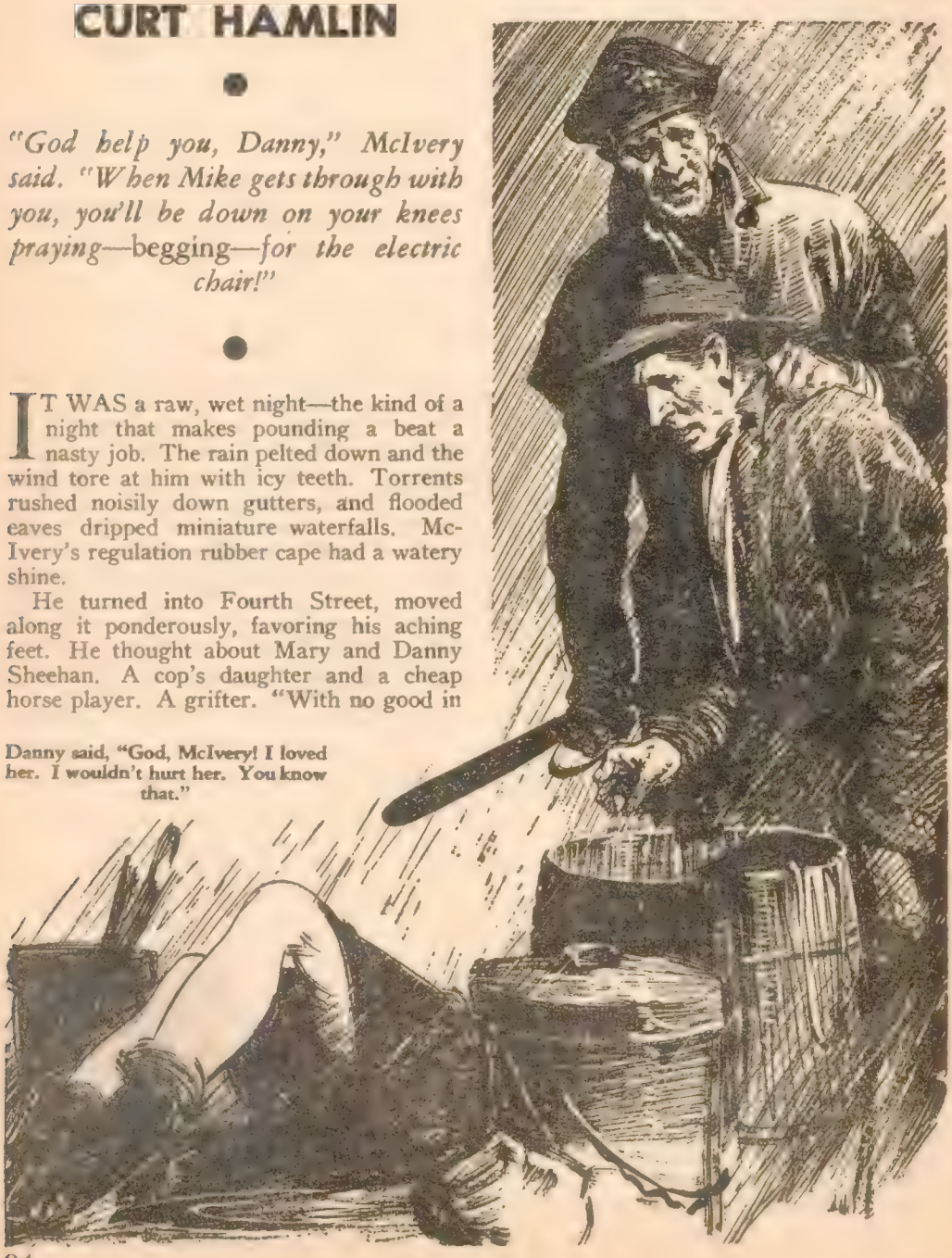
●

*"God help you, Danny," McIvery said. "When Mike gets through with you, you'll be down on your knees praying—*begging*—for the electric chair!"*

●

IT WAS a raw, wet night—the kind of a night that makes pounding a beat a nasty job. The rain pelted down and the wind tore at him with icy teeth. Torrents rushed noisily down gutters, and flooded eaves dripped miniature waterfalls. McIvery's regulation rubber cape had a watery shine.

He turned into Fourth Street, moved along it ponderously, favoring his aching feet. He thought about Mary and Danny Sheehan. A cop's daughter and a cheap horse player. A grifter. "With no good in



Danny said, "God, McIvery! I loved her. I wouldn't hurt her. You know that."

him," McIvery told himself. "Not a good bone in his whole damned body."

He turned automatically into a doorway, tried the knob. He went on.

He'd raised Mary better than that, he told himself, better than to throw herself away on a two-bit heel like Sheehan. And she didn't have to pick Danny. There were a lot of men who would marry a girl with red hair, green eyes and a laugh that was like singing. There was Mike Flynn, for one. A cop—and a good one. Five years on the force and already a sergeant on Homicide. "Likes himself too much," McIvery muttered, "but you can break a man of that. Eating his heart out for Mary, and her setting her cap for a bum."

He scowled sourly and spat toward the gutter.

Uptown, the *Journal* clock began to chime. McIvery counted the strokes. Eight of them. At eight o'clock Mary was meeting Danny on the corner of Third and Columbia. At eight o'clock.

McIvery's mind was made up now. He lengthened his stride. He turned into Columbia. The sidewalk was deserted. He went along it. His seamed face was granite hard. He thought, *I'll tell him to stay away from her. I'll tell him to leave her alone or I'll break his rotten neck with my two hands.*

He gripped the nightstick tighter. Angry veins corded his forehead.

A sudden sound made him stop. It was an animal sound, a whimpering. There was a dark doorway just short of the corner of Third. Danny Sheehan came backing out of it, began to run. He ran crazily, wobbling and loose-kneed, coming at McIvery. He was yelling, but the yelling wasn't in words. It was a choked, tortured babble. He pawed at McIvery's arm. His jaw was slack and saliva bubbled from his chattering lips. "Mary!" he screamed. "Mary! Back there!"

A sickness came into McIvery's middle. A dark sickness that scuttled on damp, cold feet. He caught at Danny's coat, jerked the boy up brutally, and said: "What about Mary?"

Danny said, "In the doorway. In the doorway." He jerked away and stumbled off, going back. "Look at her." He began to moan.

McIvery followed. He looked.

SHE LAY on her side. On her right side, with the haft of the knife jutting from under her left breast. Her eyes were closed. There was a red smear along the side of her jaw and a trickle of red running down her slender throat. McIvery knew, even without touching her, that she was dead.

Danny said, "I found her. I found her," over and over, like a metronome. McIvery put his hand on the back of Sheehan's neck and pressed until he felt the cords giving under his fingers. His voice was deadly. "Why did you do it?"

Danny said, "God, McIvery!" His eyes were wild. The grip on McIvery's hand made them bulge and darken. He said, "I loved her. I wouldn't hurt her. I loved her."

McIvery dropped his hand away slowly. He looked down at the girl's figure. Her legs were sprawled in the wax limpness of death. He said, "She's saved from marrying him, anyway." He said it in a low voice, as though he spoke only for the dead.

Sheehan was clutching at the rubber coat. "It's not my knife."

"You wouldn't use your own knife."

"Honest to God, McIvery—"

"You've got blood on your hands, Danny."

"I touched her."

McIvery said, "You touched her once too often. You'll die for it, this time."

"God, McIvery. Listen. For God's sake, listen." Sheehan's face was twisted with fear, the kind of fear that twists a face and knots a belly. "I found her that way. You've got to believe. I came here to meet her and I found her that way."

McIvery smiled. He smiled with his lips, showing his teeth. Unpleasantly. He said, "You know who'll get the case? Mike Flynn. And Mike loved her. God help you, Danny. When Mike gets through you'll be begging for the chair."

Danny Sheehan said, "God." He sat down by the body. He put his face in his hands and began to cry.

Back of the town, a siren rose in eerie wail. It came closer as McIvery listened. A police coupe roared around the corner of Third, skidded to a jerky stop at the curb. The morgue wagon was just behind it. Mike Flynn got out of the coupe. He was a tall, thin man. Dapper. His eyes were grey ice. To McIvery he said, "What is it, Mac?"

McIvery turned, facing Flynn, keeping his body between the detective and the doorway. His voice was tired and gentle. "You got to take it easy, Flynn."

Mike Flynn's jaw stiffened. "What is it?"

McIvery said, "It's Mary." He stood out of the way. He looked into Flynn's face, saw the tension that drew deep channels at the corners of the detective's mouth. He said, "Sorry, Mike."

He walked to the corner and leaned against a telephone pole. He looked at nothing. Behind him he could hear the vicious monotony of Mike Flynn's curses. The scuffling of feet and subdued murmur of voices as the medical staff hurried through its work. Once, he heard Danny Sheehan scream. He smiled.

He never knew how long he stood there. The sounds faded and Mary was alive again. She was waiting at home, the way she always waited, with her eyes laughing and the lovely shape of her taut with the vibrance of youth. A touch at his arm jerked him back to reality. Dr. Fleming, the medical examiner, stood at his shoulder. He said, "It was over quick, Mac—if that helps any."

McIvery nodded slowly. "It helps to know, Doc."

Fleming drew a package of cigarettes from his pocket, offered one. The two of them stood for a moment, silent, smoking. "Danny Sheehan did it, I suppose."

McIvery said, "I found him with her. He won't admit anything."

"Why would he want to kill her?"

McIvery shrugged. "That's what I don't know. I guess he had a reason. He must have had. Only maybe it'll be hard to prove."

"We'll prove it." The M.E. flipped away his cigarette. He chafed his hands together, warming them. They were large hands, with long, bony fingers. "He made a mistake some place. They all do."

McIvery shook his head. "Enough for me. Enough for you. Maybe not enough for a jury. Murder isn't easy to prove—not unless you can show a motive." He sucked thoughtfully at the cigarette. "How come you got here so quick? I didn't have time to put a report in."

"A no-name call," said Fleming.

McIvery's head came sharply around. "A call? Then there was a witness."

Fleming moved his shoulders. "No-names aren't easy to trace, Mac." He coughed, wiped at his mouth with a handkerchief. "This one won't be any easier than the rest. Probably harder. It came in for Flynn. It said he should drop around to the corner of Third and Columbia and see what there was to see. Flynn was out, so the central board took the call. He came in a couple of minutes later. He called me and we all came over."

McIvery said, "I see." He said it very softly. He dropped the cigarette, ground it under his heel. He opened the rubber cape, unlatched the flap of his holster, eased out the .38 Police Positive. He turned from Fleming and walked back to the group crowded around the doorway. Mary's body was gone. Mike Flynn was in the doorway, with Sheehan. Flynn lifted his arm casually and swung it in a full, solid arc. He caught Sheehan across the mouth with his fist. Danny skidded backward.

Flynn said, "Talk, damn you!"

McIvery put his left hand on Flynn's shoulder. In the right hand he held the gun—steadily. "It's all over, Mike."

THE DETECTIVE jerked himself free. "There's nothing over yet. He killed her and you caught him at it."

McIvery said, "No." He turned sideways, pressing the muzzle of the .38 into Flynn's belly. He said, "She turned you down, didn't she? That's why you killed her."

"You're nuts!"

"Am I? McIvery leaned on the gun. He said, "There was a witness to this kill."

"I got a call—"

"A witness," said McIvery. The murderer. That was you, Flynn. And then you called yourself—at Headquarters. But you made a mistake. When you sent that call in you didn't say anything about murder."

Sweat was standing out along the detective's jaw. Veins made knobs in his throat. "So what?"

"So this," said McIvery. "You knew it was murder. You must have known." He paused, and smiled. It was a cold smile. He said, "Else why did you call the dead wagon before coming out here?"

TOO MANY BLONDES!

By HANK NAPHEYS

He'd do almost anything for an easy buck, would crazy stunt pilot Hardigan, including flying under the George Washington Bridge or—the love-light in his eyes—following the heel-tap of that beautiful blonde—straight into the enfolding arms of murder!

"You're certainly laying the groundwork for a beautiful friendship," she said.

SHE WAS a champagne blonde wrapped up in a neat mink package. Sleek, silken legs carried her across the hotel lobby. An invisible veil of perfume swirled around Hardigan's head as she dizzied by on incredibly high heels. By the time she reached the desk, Hardigan's freshly lighted cigarette had gone out and

the forgotten match had singed his fingers.

The blonde affected Hardigan just like that. He'd never seen her before this minute. And he realized he'd never see her again—unless he did something about it. He strode over to the desk and stood beside her. She used good perfume, he decided. Her paint job was Broadway but rather exciting. Gloved hands kept the mink tightly wrapped about her slim body.

When Hardigan stepped up beside her, she stopped talking to the desk clerk. The intrusion seemed to vex the clerk, for he ceased fluttering his eyebrows and stared down his nose at Hardigan.

"Pardon me," said Hardigan, looking at the blonde. She kept her face averted, so Hardigan continued to the clerk: "A Mr. Bellows phoned my room and was to meet me here in the lobby."

"You told me that, Mr. Hardigan," pointed out the clerk, "not two minutes ago. I have already dispatched a boy to locate Mr. Bellows."

Hardigan ignored the clerk's reproving glance. He was watching the blonde's lips. They rippled with the tremulous quivering of her mouth. The girl turned and faced Hardigan.

But it was the clerk who spoke. "The boy is coming now—"

Hardigan didn't hear the rest. The champagne blonde was smiling—at him.

"Mr. Hardigan, I must talk with you," she was saying.

A brightly uniformed bellhop appeared before Hardigan. "Mr. Bellows is in the Picardy Lounge, sir."

The blonde suggested, "I could wait in your room, Mr. Hardigan."

Hardigan took a very good look at the blonde and decided it was his day. He pressed his key into her gloved fingers. "You'll find some Scotch and cigarettes. Be seeing you all of a sudden."

He was a little groggy when he reached the Picardy Lounge. The bellhop showed him Mr. Bellows.

Bellows looked like two eggs—one perched upon the other. His round belly was the bottom of one egg, his bald head the top of the other. Put springs under the lower egg and you had Bellows. He bounced across the lounge to pause before Hardigan, quivering like a sprung jack-in-the-box.

"Mr. Hardigan, this is a pleasure, sir. Not every day do I get to meet a celebrated stunt pilot." He cocked his head as he surveyed Hardigan from head to foot. "You are just the man for the job—the very man, sir." Bellows kept capitalizing the *sir*. Hardigan didn't like it.

"Well—" Hardigan's voice was edged with impatience—"Keep talking."

"It's a flying assignment, sir. Very simple. And the fee is—most liberal."

"How much is *most?*"

"Ten thousand dollars, sir."

Hardigan thought of the champagne blonde. Ten thousand would buy a lot of high times. "What's the assignment, Bellows?"

"I want you to loop under the George Washington Bridge, and then just shave the Paramount clock."

Hardigan's eyes got muddy. He said gently, "You know what you can do with that money, Bellows. It wouldn't do me any good—when I lost my license and got slipped in the can."

Bellows bounced in front of Hardigan as the flyer turned to leave the lounge. "But, my dear sir—you will be doubling for my client, the same as you double for the Hollywood stars. Your name will never enter into it. Five thousand dollars when you take the plane up, and the other five when you bring it back. Then you will bow out of the picture—unknown, unsung. But, may I add, not unhonored."

Hardigan popped an impatient gust of breath. "And you can do the same with all that guff. Just tell me where the crate is, when I get into it—and where you'll be with the second five G's." Hardigan waited for the answer, permitting himself a vagrant thought of the lush little blonde rolling in a surf of green folding money.

"Come out to Rosyln this afternoon," said Bellows. "The Derry place. Phone from the station and we'll—"

"I'll drive out." Hardigan started walking from the lounge. Bellows bounced along beside him. At the elevator bank, Bellows waved a final farewell and was off. Hardigan stifled a compelling urge to plant the sole of his foot on Bellows' bottom.

GOING up in the elevator, Hardigan reflected that he had left his room in a mess. But the Scotch was in a prominent

place. He doubted that the blonde would have much trouble finding it.

She hadn't. And she was making herself quite at home. The mink coat lay across the bed. She was sitting on the floor, her legs crossed and her burgundy dress not doing much of a job in covering them. A glass of Scotch and water was in her left hand. Hardigan's personal scrapbook was in her other. Before her was his suitcase showing the effects of an efficient pawing-over.

Hardigan closed the door and put his shoulder blades against it. "Make yourself to home," he said.

"I have, thank you." The blonde's eyes raised briefly to his, then went back to the scrapbook. She spoke again without looking up. "Stunt flying in Hollywood must be a rather exciting life, Hardigan. Not much money in it, though—eh?"

Hardigan pushed away from the door. He mixed a Scotch and water. With a stiff swig under his belt, he squinted down at the blonde. "Would you mind telling me just what the hell you mean by pawing through my things?"

"You haven't answered my question, Hardigan."

"Okay, Toots. We'll play your way. Your question, first. The money is not too bad. Now—"

The champagne blonde cut in with, "But it's not really good enough to keep you honest."

Hardigan finished his Scotch and put down the glass. Very deliberately he grasped the girl under her armpits and raised her to her feet. She offered no struggle—just stood there, her face inches from his.

"Your turn," said Hardigan. "You've got lots of answers. I want 'em."

She was silent a long moment before saying, "How deep are you in in this crummy business, Hardigan?"

The flyer wagged his head. "I don't follow, luscious. Try another step."

"All right," muttered the blonde. "The hell with you."

Hardigan still held her, his palms pressing against her armpits. "You're missing out on ten grand worth of fun."

"Whose ten grand, Hardigan?"

"Bellows' ten grand. You wouldn't know him."

The blonde threw back her head and laughed till she shook in Hardigan's arms. Her warm breath was on his face. "I wouldn't know him!" She checked herself abruptly, peered steadily into Hardigan's eyes. Then she glanced down at his hands.

Hardigan took his hands from under her arms reluctantly.

She rubbed her armpits. "I'll bet they are all black and blue."

"I have just the thing for bruises," suggested Hardigan.

"Never mind. I'll suffer."

Hardigan said, "Bellows—remember?"

"Yes, Bellows." The blonde shuttered her eyes. "Just who and what did he tell you he was?"

Hardigan wagged his head. "Funny. With all his damn talking, he never did get around to that. Hell of a talker, isn't he? He'd still be blabbing his big mouth, if I hadn't stopped him."

"How far did he get, Hardigan?"

"To ten thousand."

The champagne blonde stepped back from Hardigan. She looked down, kicked his scrapbook across the room. "That's you, all right. Big Hollywood flyer. Tough guy. Dames and dough. Hard-boiled Hardigan. Hollywood's high-flying heel."

Hardigan said casually, "Bellows—remember? You were going to tell me who he is."

She threw her head back to toss the anger out of her system. "Bellows, that plush-bottomed shyster! He—stop me, if you've heard it before—is the administrator of the the Derry estate."

An amused smile curved Hardigan's mouth. "And who are you—the missing heiress?"

"I am Mrs. Dennis Derry."

Hardigan stared at her. "You, married to that screwball!"

She nodded her blonde head to that. "Dennis is a screwball, all right. But he's a level Joe. And I'm not letting anyone pull a fast one on him." She sauntered, loose-jointed, over to Hardigan, pushed her face close to his. "What's the pitch, Hardigan?"

HE RAISED his hands even with his shoulders and flapped his wrists. "Flying, baby, that's my racket. I'm flying for Bellows. Ask him the details. God knows he loves to talk."

Mrs. Dennis Derry wasn't giving up. "Well, Dennis dabbles in aviation—"

"—and in blondes and bourbon," finished Hardigan. His forefinger lightly brushed her chin. "But you're still Toots to me, sister—till you tell me the how-come of barging into my room and poking your little snoot into my things."

"So I'm still Toots. But get it through your skull that no crummy stuff is going to be pulled on Dennis Derry. He's screwy, whacky or whatever you want to call him—but he's one square guy."

"In that case," Hardigan said, "let's drink to the man." He took the empty glass from her hand, picked up his own and made two fresh drinks. When he gave her the drink, she asked:

"When are you seeing Bellows again?"

Hardigan told her.

She worried her lower lip between her teeth. "I'm going out to Roslyn, too. With you, Hardigan."

He looked resigned. "Me, always a sucker for blondes—me and Dennis." He shrugged. "And with ten G's tossed in, too."

She seemed to take exception, studying him a moment. "You on my side?"

"I'm on Hardigan's side, baby."

Her eyebrows drew together. "No matter whose side you're on, stop calling me baby, luscious and Toots. If you don't like Mrs. Derry—call me Token."

"Token," repeated Hardigan. He liked it. Maybe she was thawing. He slid his arm around her shoulders, just in case. "I'm Jack."

She eased from the encirclement of his arm. "Hello, Jack."

He decided to give a little ground, for maneuvering. "Tell you what, Token, if this deal looks fouled-up, I'll pull out. Fair enough?"

Token's eyes were wary. "I'd like to shake on that, Jack." She transferred her glass to her left hand.

Hardigan took her hand, drew her gently toward him. He looked around for some place to put down his glass.

Token shook her head, said quietly, "Let's save it, Jack—till I feel the same way. What a time we'll have, then."

Hardigan buttoned up his mouth and raised his glass. He took a very deep breath, slowly exhaled. Then he said, "Here's to it." He stared at the glass.

Token touched the brim of her glass to his. She repeated his words in a husky whisper. They killed the drinks.

He walked over to the bed and picked up her mink coat. It felt heavy. He explored the pocket and found a small revolver. With a deft movement he dropped it on his bed and flicked the sheet over it. He returned to her with the coat.

"Burn-'em-down Derry," he said. "Dead men all around."

Token eased into the coat, her hand going to the pocket. She glared up at Hardigan, said through her teeth, "You're certainly laying the ground-work for a beautiful friendship."

IN THE car they sat like two warring alley cats, close together, claws ready, but completely ignoring each other. Hardigan drove fast with beautiful control. His speedy little convertible purred over the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, out Northern Boulevard, past Douglaston and the City Line. Braking down a curving hill, they came suddenly upon the Roslyn tower clock and bore to the right. Presently, a huge stone arch loomed over the prow of the car. And to one side was a glass reflector sign spelling out *Derry*.

Hardigan rocked the car to a dead stop. They both looked toward one side of the open iron-grille gate. There on the gate hung a crepe. Not one of dull black, but a very bright scarlet.

Hardigan peered at the gaudy funeral design. "Looks like maybe somebody has death on his mind."

Token was silent, frowning.

Hardigan drove into the graveled driveway lined with whitewashed stones. The road wound through acres of lawn now brown with the dead grass of winter. As they passed the swimming pool, Token said, "Look."

Hardigan braked to get a good look. There was a statue of a nymph on a fountain at one end of the pool. The nymph was snugly covered with a chinchilla coat and had a rakishly tilted silk topper on her head. In her outstretched hand was a large silver cocktail shaker.

"Seems like there was a gay party hereabouts," murmured Hardigan.

"This," said Token, "looks more like

home. Get what I've been driving at, Hardigan? Dennis is harmless—whacky as hell, but a right gee. He gave me a fair shake, and I'm here to see that he gets the same."

"Yeah, sure," said Hardigan. "He's Galahad with the d.t.'s. I'm the black fiend. Lay off, will you?" He wheeled the car up to a very elaborate canopy.

A horse-faced flunky walked down the steps and opened the car door without cracking a smile. As Token stepped out, the man said, "I'm sorry, Miss Derry, that you saw fit to terminate my services. It's fifteen years last month since I began—"

"I know nothing about it," said Token. "There's some mistake."

The flunky sniffed the air. "Cook, the gardner, three maids and two butlers have already left." When Token started to speak, the man said, "It is definite, ma'am. I am leaving. Thank you."

Cleve Bellows bounced out of the house on his pogo legs. His face was split in a beaming smile. "My dear Token," he cried, "this is a pleasure. Welcome home." Pudgy little hands outstretched, he pranced down the steps to the car.

Token said, "What do the servants—"

"That stuffy bunch," said Bellows. "We're well rid of them. Don't even think about them, I beg of you." He looked over at Hardigan. "Well, well! Mr. Hardigan." He glanced back at Token. "How did you—"

"I thumbed a ride," said Token. She led the way up the wide, white steps and into a huge rotunda of the size and cheerfulness of an empty skating rink. There, she touched Hardigan's arm. "See what I see?"

Hardigan didn't. Being a man, he saw the legs first: slim, beautifully molded and rounding up exquisitely into the briefest of sun-suit trunks. Then he saw the lazy halter, doing a makeshift job of its appointed task. Above that he saw the baseball catcher's mask.

Behind the grille of the catcher's mask was a pert, pretty face. Two baby-blue eyes looked out, flicked over Token and then rested on Hardigan, carefully sizing him up.

Hardigan asked, "Where's the rest of the team?"

The sun-suited girl chuckled, then took off the mask. It was an improvement.

She was a blonde, her hair a shade darker than Token's. She said, "Dennis insists that I wear the mask—so he won't be tempted to kiss me. He's drunker than a skunk."

Hardigan said a very careful nothing.

Token made the introduction. "Alice, this is Mr. Hardigan who is out on business for Mr. Bellows. . . . Jack, Miss Alice Oakland—the first Mrs. Derry."

HARDIGAN bowed. Just a big, jolly family, he thought. Token and Alice were about the same build with almost the same color hair. Hardigan decided that Token had the edge on both face and figure. That put Token way up the ladder, for Alice was a devastating little number in her own right.

Bellows hovered in the background, beaming from one to the other.

Token asked Alice, "Where is Dennis now?"

"He started on a buster last night. He decorated the grounds in his own inimitable manner, as you saw on the way in. This morning he disappeared. He'll probably come to life in some Bowery flophouse two weeks from Sunday." She shrugged her bare shoulders. "Or he might pop in here any minute. You know Dennis, my dear."

Bellows dry-washed his hands. "What say to a cocktail? I wouldn't ask that pie-faced butler. Might put rat poison in 'em. Whip 'em up myself. What say?"

Alice ran a pointed tongue around her lips. "Aye!" Then she spoke to Token, her voice too casual. "You run upstairs and freshen up, dear—I'll be right with you."

Token nodded her champagne head and walked toward the great staircase without a word to anyone. Hardigan watched her lithe, sinuous sway, and felt his throat getting dry. When Token rounded the curve in the staircase and disappeared, Alice said to Hardigan, "You like?"

Hardigan looked down at her and saw that Bellows had gone off about his cocktail business. He said, "Nothing wrong with Dennis Derry's taste."

"Thank you, sugar—if you meant to include me." When Hardigan nodded without speaking, Alice went on: "Let me show you the gym downstairs. I just had a work-

out there. Allus sweat out a hangover, I says." She linked her arm under his. "This way."

The gym included a tennis court, a glass-roofed putting green and every gadget with which a millionaire sportsman would indulge himself. Dennis Derry certainly had his manly moments.

Hardigan walked over to a punching bag, tapped it slowly back and forth, gradually increasing the tempo till he had the staccato rhythm of a machine gun. Then he stepped back, grinning.

Alice said, "So you're the big Hollywood stunt pilot who's going to sic the cops on Derry."

"Come again?"

Alice chose her words: "When you loop bridges and graze buildings in Derry's plane—the cops will hunt for Derry. They'll find him for Bellows. Simple, isn't it?"

"Expensive hide-an'-seek," said Hardigan.

Alice shrugged, quickly readjusted the halter. "Not from the Derry point of view. If Denny isn't home, sober and on the job in two days, he stands to lose several million."

Hardigan said thoughtfully, "Maybe I could stick Bellows for some more dough."

Alice came close, smiled up at him. "Don't ever say I'm not a friend of yours." She pointed a finger at a swinging ring overhead. "Give me a boost, mister."

He fastened his hands around her firm waist, easily lifted her to the ring. Alice swung back and forth, lazily, gracefully. Then she swung to the next ring. Hardigan kept pace with her, measuring his steps to her swing.

"Who's top woman in this whacky set-up, anyway?" he asked.

"I am, mister. Token walked out six months ago. She went back to her beloved musical comedy," Alice laughed. "She wouldn't accept a dime from Denny. Me, —I'm different." Alice reached the last ring and called down to Hardigan, "Catch me." She let go and dropped.

Hardigan caught her. She slid down against him till her toes touched the floor. She took a deep breath, held it. "You like me, mister?"

Hardigan asked, "Comfortable?"

She stirred. "You could make me more comfortable."

"That should be fun," said Hardigan. "Give me a rain-check on it."

Alice twisted tigerishly. Hardigan caught her wrist as she swung at his face. He held her wrist roughly enough to get across the idea that he wasn't kidding. Then he said, "Let's surround those cocktails Bellows was yapping about."

Her eyes never rose above the level of his necktie knot. "You can't blame a gal for trying, mister."

BELLOWS, in the library, was bouncing up and down, vigorously rattling ice cubes and sloshing liquor in a shaker. He looked at Alice's inscrutable face, frowned, then shot a glance at Hardigan.

Alice turned on her heel, flipped her hand in a farewell and left the room. Hardigan watched her go, then turned to Bellows, saying, "I'll take that five thousand advance —now."

The shaker paused in the air. Bellows looked under it. "When you take the plane up, my dear sir."

"Now."

Bellows pulled the cap off the shaker and sniffed at the contents. "You'll like this, Mr. Hardigan." He poured the purplish, frothy mixture into two glasses. "We'll sneak a snort before the Derry wives come down. Here's luck, sir." He took a good gulp and set down the glass. "The advance? Just as you wish—now." He reached into his pocket.

Hardigan sampled the drink. It tasted like grape juice, vanilla ice cream and a tough belt of gin. He nodded. "Fine."

Taking an envelope from his pocket, Bellows extracted a sheaf of currency. He crumpled the envelope, wadded it into a neat little ball and popped it into the waste-basket. "Here you are, sir—five thousand dollars."

Hardigan swiftly counted the money, shoved it carelessly into his pocket. "Okay. When do I take off?"

"Any moment you wish. We'll hop in the car and drive over to the field. Derry's own field, I might add. It's about ten minutes in the car. But—er—let us have another of these little quickies." He poured two drinks, raised his. "To your very good luck, sir."

"Thanks." Hardigan sipped his drink, then looked out the door toward the great

staircase. He saw Token coming down alone. "Excuse me," he said to Bellows. He went out into the huge foyer and watched Token sway rhythmically down the steps. Her body was burgundy quicksilver. She had brushed her hair into shimmering sunlight. Her mink coat was folded over her left arm. The fingers of her right hand lightly touched the broad bannister as she descended.

She raised her champagne head, saw Hardigan. Her eyes were narrowed. She walked up to him and asked quietly, "Hardigan still on Hardigan's side?"

He studied her a moment before saying, "Nothing has happened to make me change sides."

"Alice says you're a heel."

Hardigan grinned broadly. "That's her story."

"She says you would do anything for a buck—or—"

"Still her story," said Hardigan. "What do you think?"

"Are you taking the plane up, Jack?"

He nodded. "And I've collected five of the ten thousand."

Token's lips became a taut line. "Damn you and your damn money. That shyster and that tramp are cooking up something against Dennis—and I can't figure what. And all you think about is—"

"Hardigan," he said. He reached forward, plucked a shiny, nickel-plated automatic from her mink pocket, and dropped it into his jacket. "This is getting tiresome, baby."

Token thrust her face close to his. Her lips skinned back from her teeth. "Big tough guy. I know your rep, Hardigan. But get this—gun or no gun, I'm going up in that plane with you."

"You're taking a chance," Hardigan said, "seeing that you can't get out and walk back."

Token's shoulders sagged, and she wagged her head in helpless desperation. "Can't you see, Jack—there's something terrible going on here. You're not an idiot."

Hardigan shrugged. "That's open to question. But I'll figure their pitch—with you yapping in my ear every two minutes. Stay in character, baby. Just look beautiful, roll your eyes, wiggle your hips—but keep your mouth shut."

"You admit they have a pitch!" She grasped his arm. "You're wise to them, Hardigan!" Her eyes turned to blue ice. "Damn you, if you're figuring some blackmail angle—"

"Relax, baby. Here comes Alice." He nodded toward the staircase.

Alice was starting down the wide staircase. She was wearing a very tight green dress. The green had a gentle tossing effect as she descended.

Bellows came out of the library, reaching Hardigan and Token at the same time Alice stopped before them. Bellows looked at Token's mink wrapper, asking, "Are you leaving, Token?"

Token's chin tilted belligerently. "I'm going up with Hardigan."

Bellows spread his hands. "The decision rests entirely with Mr. Hardigan."

"Okay with me," Hardigan said. "And it won't cost you any extra, Bellows."

Bellows cackled. "You are a card, sir. Indeed you are. A veritable card!" He thrust his hands into his pants pockets and rocked on his heels. "Well, any time you are ready, sir."

"Let's go," said Hardigan.

Alice announced. "I'll pick up the cans of beer from the kitchen and meet you at the car." Then to Token: "You'll remember that Denny drinks only beer when he is flying." Turning slightly, she spoke to the knot on Hardigan's tie. "The realistic touch—as you say in Hollywood, mister."

BELLOWS, driving one of Dennis Derry's sedans, chauffeured them out to the small airfield. Alice sat beside him, her mouth gusting cigarette smoke like a beautiful dragon. Hardigan was in the rear. His jaw line was hard, taut, and his eyes were unreadable slits. Token never once took her accusing stare off him. When Bellows rolled the sedan up to the hangar, Token cleared her throat.

Hardigan's mouth silently formed the words, "Shut up," and drew a wicked glare from Token.

Bellows announced, "There she is." The plane was a sleek black job, sitting outside its hangar. The prop was ticking over, warming up the motor. Bellows said to Hardigan, "I told the mechanic to roll out the plane and warm it up, then I sent him on an errand. The less he knows, the less

he'll even be able to blab around about."

Alice got out of the car and walked over to the plane. She was carrying the paper bag with the beer cans. Hardigan and Bellows got out of the car. Token followed. She was jumpy, wary, her suspicious eyes flicking from Hardigan to Bellows.

Alice returned to the group, saying, "Beer's on board."

Hardigan nudged Token. "Get back into the car."

She jumped at his touch. "The hell I will!" She backed away from him. "So this is the old cross, eh? You won't get away with it, Hardigan!"

He swiftly closed on her, lifted her in his arms and carried her to the sedan. He dumped her into the front seat and crawled over her kicking, threshing body to get behind the wheel. He held her off with a stiffened arm and grinned into her furious face. "Take it easy, baby. I've got this thing figured. Sit tight."

Hardigan then called out to the astonished Bellows and Alice, "I'm going to take a little ride. You two can stay here, if you want to."

Alice and Bellows exchanged apprehensive looks, then quickly got into the back of the sedan. Bellows spluttered: "I—I don't understand. . . ."

"The hell you don't," growled Hardigan.

He swung the sedan in a turn and drove back the way they had come. About three hundred yards from the hangar, he slowed to a stop and set the hand brake. Hardigan turned around in the seat and faced the two in the back. He said, jerking his thumb toward the little plane out on the now distant field, "Just about now, Token and I would be climbing into the plane."

Alice said, "So the great Hollywood ace gets cold feet. Let's get out of here. I'm bored stiff."

"You're stiff all right—" agreed Hardigan—"scared stiff." He said to Bellows. "And you shut your face. I have a little story to tell—sort of kill time. . . . In the early part of the war, a pal of mine shipped on a Norwegian tanker in convoy with the Royal Navy. I guess his ship was one of the first to be the goat for a new Nazi stunt. Anyway, one of the tanker's seamen picked up a girl in Hoboken. She gave this seaman a little going-away present—"

Hardigan broke off and looked at the plane, its prop still ticking over. He said, "Token and I would be taking off now. We'd be leaving the ground. You two would be in this car and getting away from here—fast. By now, Token and I would be well into the climb and—"

All four pairs of eyes were riveted on the little black plane. And as they watched, the glass-enclosed cockpit blossomed in a spray of flame. The flame swiftly filled the cockpit, engulfed everything in it.

Hardigan's voice was brittle, icy: "Token and I would now be two 'burgers, well done."

The little black plane seemed to swell with the intense heat in its belly. Then the gas tank went. The plane disintegrated before their eyes. The sound of the explosion swept past them in an angry wave.

Token sat like a sick stone; then slowly her jaw stiffened, her eyes narrowed. She turned and glared pure, white-hot hatred at the two in the rear seat.

Alice and Bellows stared in numbed silence at the scattered, burning parts of the plane.

Hardigan's voice ripped the silence: "I was telling you about the Hoboken girl and the Norwegian seaman. She gave him cans of beer to take on shipboard. There wasn't much left of the tanker to sink, after the beer-can fire bomb got to the cargo. And with enough money to throw around and the right connections, a person could buy them now."

Token whispered hoarsely, "Why Jack? Why?"

"Figure it out yourself, baby. Bellows would tell the authorities that Dennis Derry and Alice Oakland, both roaring drunk, perished in the plane when it took fire. Alice, being your size, build and a blonde, would pose as the widow. With all the servants gone and with Bellows backing the play, it would be a cinch. In several weeks, Alice could go to Europe and there spend the rest of her life—and the Derry millions. Great stuff—if it had worked."

Bellows opened his mouth and fluttered his lips, but no words came out.

Alice sneered at Hardigan. "You're a great big smart son, aren't you? Now all you've got to do—is prove it."

"A pleasure—" Hardigan was grinning—"a definite pleasure. I'm going to beat the fat off Bellows till he sings the words and

music I want to hear. . . . Bellows, out of the car!" Hardigan opened his door, stepped out, opened the rear door and pulled Bellows out on the road.

Bellows' mouth was still quivering, and still no sounds came.

Hardigan said, "You know the one answer I want," and hit him. Bellows went down to his knees, weaved on all fours like a groggy pig.

Token said, "Kick him in the face." Then her voice got very quiet as she asked Hardigan, "How deep is Alice—in this?"

"Right up to her mean little eyes. She told you that Bellows was planning dirty work against Dennis and that Bellows was meeting me at my hotel. And at the house she told you I was all kinds of a heel. So you insisted on flying with me. Add it up, Token."

Hardigan lifted Bellows to his feet, then hit him hard in the stomach. As Bellows sagged, retching, Hardigan squashed the fat man's nose. Blood squirted, and Bellows went down on his back.

Alice screeched, "You're a damned big hero! Pick on somebody—"

"Save your breath," said Hardigan. "If this doesn't work on Bellows, I'm going to play it on you."

Token said, "I've added it up, Jack. Where is—Dennis?"

"That's what Bellows is going to tell me." Hardigan grabbed Bellows' coat and dragged him to his feet. Bellows brought up his knee in a sharp jab. His fear-crazed eyes had telegraphed the blow. Hardigan moved swiftly to one side, then put the power of his shoulder behind a vicious drive into Bellows' stomach.

Token had flung herself over the back of the seat and was straddling Alice, banging her head against the rear window. There was a lively tussle going on between the girls.

Hardigan sat on his heels beside Bellows, took out a cigarette and lighted it. He inhaled deeply, letting the smoke plume from his nostrils. Bellows opened his eyes; they were very sick eyes. They flinched when they saw Hardigan.

Hardigan said gently, "Where did you put Dennis Derry?"

Bellows turned his face away, tried to crawl away on his back.

Hardigan went on, just as gently, "I can keep this up till I kill you. It's up to you, fella. I just don't give a damn."

Bellows finally forced words through his lips. "Under the garage."

"How did you finish him?"

"I—didn't—"

"What was used?"

"A knife. . . . Alice's fingerprints on it. . . . He was drunk. . . . She killed him. . . .I've got the knife." He whispered, "My ace-in-the-hole. . . ."

Hardigan said, "She plan—the works?" When Bellows nodded. Hardigan then asked, "Where's this knife that'll save you from the chair?"

Bellows' voice was barely audible: "My office—safe." Then he turned on his side and became a very sick man.

Hardigan got to his feet, flipped his cigarette away and looked into the sedan. Token was sitting in the back seat, her feet propped on Alice who was on the floor of the car. Hardigan asked, "Did you kill her?"

"I wish I *could* kill her!" Token's eyes were moist. "Dennis—"was one level gee."

Hardigan nodded. "You're all right yourself, baby." He lifted Bellows and put him on top of Alice. Token climbed back over the front seat as Hardigan slid under the wheel. Hardigan said, "The law takes over from here." He got the car going. . . .

HOURS later, after the grind of the police routine, after the finding of Dennis Derry's body, after the finding of the knife and checking Alice Oakland's prints, Hardigan drove Token back toward the city in his convertible.

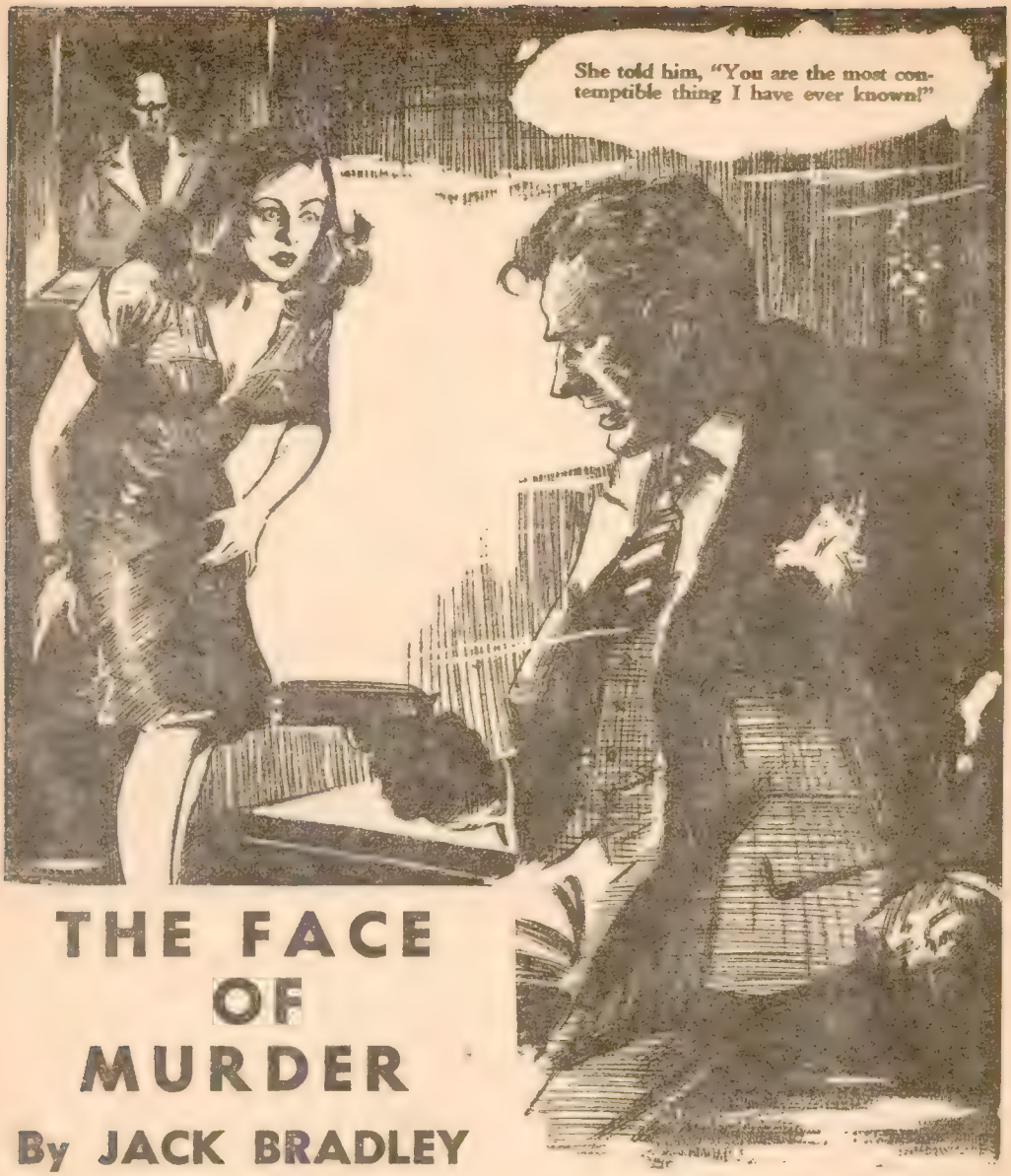
They both had been quiet till they reached the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge and saw the lights of Manhattan. Then Hardigan said, "You're one of the richest ladies in this big, bright town."

Token said. "I plan to be in California in about a month. I want to get this town, and everything about it, out of my system. You'll be back in California—about then?"

"I'll be there."

"Could you arrange for a place for me to stay?"

"It's done," said Hardigan. He lighted two cigarettes in his mouth, passed one to Token.



THE FACE OF MURDER

By JACK BRADLEY

Steve Warner's face was his trademark. . . . But when murder plastered his picture over the Wanted *ads of a nation, how could he destroy that trademark—without destroying himself?*

■

HE HAD first discovered his face when he was ten years old. He had stolen a watch belonging to a classmate and everybody in the class had been suspected except himself. That night, after he had hidden the watch under a pile of toys in his closet, he had gone to the mirror and looked at his face.

It was the face of an angel. Innocent-looking blue eyes under a thatch of pale gold hair, and the clear, peach-bloom com-

plexion of perfect health. The firmly rounded chin and the wide, generous mouth were the final touches that gave him an appearance of absolute trustworthiness.

"Gee!" he had exclaimed raptly. "No wonder they didn't give me the works. Nobody in the world would believe a punk with a face like that could be crooked."

That had been back in the early twenties, in the days of the gang wars. To him, the gangster barons were thundering gods. Already, he was thinking and speaking in their language. . . .

* * *

Stephen Warner grinned wearily, as he recalled that ten-year-old boy. "Cripes! I thought I was a big-shot already. Stealing a lousy ten-dollar watch and getting away with it."

He sent the big car lurching around a bend in the mountain road and shifted his aching body to a more comfortable position. He had been at the wheel now for more than twenty-four hours, and he knew that he couldn't keep going much longer. Every tortured nerve in his body screamed for rest, and yet he dared not stop. Too many people knew his face.

A horn blared suddenly back of him, and his heart leaped to his throat as he yanked his hat down to cover his face while they passed. They roared past him in a cloud of dust, and he relaxed with a shaky sigh. It was a big sedan, loaded down with kids and luggage—tourists, on vacation. He swore bitterly as he stared after them.

They could stop off at any farmhouse and sleep to their heart's content, while he dared not stop at any place where someone might have seen his photo in a newspaper or magazine. That damned face of his! Probably every third person in the whole country knew that face, he reflected bitterly. People who wouldn't have recognized President Truman on the open street would know him instantly. That, of course, was because of the school.

WHEN he had left home, he had gone to the underworld as naturally as an alcoholic drifting to the nearest bar. For a time, he had acted as lookout, errand boy for the big-shots and all-around hoodlum. Then an old-timer in the rackets had given him the tip that had changed his life.

"Get away from the rough stuff and stay away from it, kid. Any punk can carry a rod and do life on the installment plan. But a guy with a face like yours could go to the top in a strictly legitimate racket. Look, I'm giving you the address of a friend of mine in Cincy. She calls herself Madame Zona, and she's only a two-bit mitt-reader, but she can give you a start."

Madame Zona had given him a start, all right. In two years, he was one of the best mitt-readers in the racket. But he was not satisfied. Spend half an hour on a mitt-reading for some dame for a buck or two bucks? The hell with that stuff! The big dough, he began to realize, was in a course of lessons, where you could get a whole roomful of the suckers in a class, at ten bucks a throw.

So, he had launched the Stephen Warner School for the Development of the Inner Personality, and it had been a success from the start. Women saw that smooth, open face, heard that gently booming voice and came back with their friends. The money began to roll in, and Warner promptly plowed it back into bigger and better ads.

Then he had started giving lessons by mail. The wording of his ads had to be skillful, because Uncle does not like his mails to be used for fraudulent purposes. But even Uncle couldn't keep people from being fooled when they wanted to be fooled. The ten-dollar bills began to pour in by the thousands. And every one of those ten-dollar bills brought back a series of lessons with Stephen Warner's photo at the top of the first page. A face so nobly inspiring that it lulled all doubt.

Every hick town in the country had someone who owned Stephen Warner's photo on a course of lessons. And, for every one who owned a photo on those lessons, there were thousands who had seen it in newspapers, in magazines, and on billboards. . . .

* * *

Warner jerked his head up wildly. He had been nodding, and the big car had crept over until it was scant inches from the edge of the road. He pulled it back to safety and groaned wearily, as he shifted the heavy .45 automatic to a more comfortable

position under his shoulder. He looked around him with bloodshot eyes.

On every side, the great, lonely mountains spread away in solitary grandeur. Surely, there must be someone in these hills who had never seen his face in a newspaper or on a billboard. He would have to take a chance on it very soon, he knew. He simply could not keep going much longer. And yet, he would have to be so careful. He had left two murdered people behind him, and he knew that his crime must have been broadcast all over the whole eastern seaboard.

Abruptly, he had a flashing vision of Mildred, lying there with the dark blood seeping out of the great hole the .45 had blasted in her chest and he whimpered weakly.

"Mildred! Mildred! Why did it have to end this way?"

* * *

Mildred Hastings had been just another of his pupils—at first. Then he had begun to realize that her face was a feminine counterpart of his own. The same innocent eyes, the same look of absolute trustworthiness. The difference was that her face spoke the truth. She *was* the things her face proclaimed her—and it fascinated Warner. Presently, he began to want this girl more than he had ever wanted anything in his whole life.

Oddly enough, she returned his love. She really believed he was doing a great and noble work. They would have been married in another week, had it not been for the matter of old man Simpson.

He had been taking Simpson over for a three-thousand-dollar "investment" and Mildred had walked in on them at exactly the wrong moment. She had seen the whole set-up in a flash and had denounced him. As long as he lived, he would never be able to forget the scorn in her eyes as she told him, "You are the most contemptible thing I have ever known!"

Old man Simpson had rushed for the phone to call the police and Warner had drawn the gun merely to frighten him. Who would have dreamed that the old fool would try to jump a man with a .45 in his hand? But he had tried it, and there had been a struggle. Somehow, the gun had gone off and Simpson had ended up on the floor with half his face blown away.

And then Stephen Warner had gone completely berserk! There was a roaring in his ears and, through a red haze, he had seen Mildred coming toward him, that look of utter loathing still on her face. With that roaring still in his ears, he had fired one slug from the big automatic into her and then rushed out of the house, the smoking gun still in his hand. Half a dozen people, attracted by the sound of the shots, had seen him rushing out and now, he knew, every newspaper and radio in the country was warning citizens to be on the lookout for him.

HE RAISED his burning eyes and stared at the unending ribbon of concrete that lay ahead of him, trying to see a cut-off road. He couldn't keep going more than another hour or two, and he knew it. He pressed down the accelerator, trying to get an extra bit of speed from the car.

His eyes were too strained to see the "Dangerous Curve" sign ahead of him. The next thing he knew, he was whizzing straight out toward the edge of the cliff and a fifty-foot drop. He screamed shrilly and shut his eyes as he wrenched frantically at the wheel. There was a blinding crash, and then the whole universe was filled with screaming thunder and shooting flames. Then, merciful oblivion. . . .

He felt that it was but a split second before he opened his eyes again. He was in a pit filled with great, roaring flames, and giant clubs were beating at his flesh. He raised his head a little.

A few feet away from him, the car lay on its side, blazing furiously. Looking down, he saw small flames on his clothing. Then he saw a gaunt, bearded face bending over him, saw a man's hands slapping out the flames. The hands clutched him, rolling him over, on the road, smothering the rest of the flames. Then, as from a great distance, he heard the man's voice.

"Come on, mister! Gotta get you away from here before she blows up. Come on! You gotta help me."

By some miracle of will-power, he managed to stagger to his feet and the bearded man half led, half carried him back up the hill. The rest of it was a blurry nightmare of stumbling over rocks and fallen logs

through the thick woods until, eons later, he saw a rough clapboard shack looming up before him. Then there was a rough bed and he was stumbling toward it. That was the last thing he remembered. . . .

When he awoke, he was in bed, and his face and hands had been bandaged. Warner turned his head weakly and saw the bearded man sitting beside the bed. The old fellow was dressed in overalls and denim shirt, and looked as though he had not had a bath in months. One of the local hill farmers, Warner decided.

"What happened?" he asked.

The old fellow turned and deliberately spat tobacco juice through an open window. "Well," he said, "you come 'round that curve like a bat out of hell and crashed smack into a tree. I jest happened to be there—was out with my gun, tryin' for a mess of squirrel—and I run down to the road and pulled you out 'fore you burned to death. Shore had a time gettin' you here to my place, too. Then I went out and got old Doc Winters and he fixed you up fine. Only—he said he'd have to charge you five dollars, account of it was a house visit. Seemed purty high to me."

"Oh, that's all right," Warner cut in impatiently. "Did—did the doctor know who I was?"

"Nope, not at first. Then he looked at your driver's license and found your name. Said he'd ask you how to get in touch with your folks when he come back tomorrow. Reckon he's figgerin' on gittin' in as many of them five-dollar visits as he can. Doc Winters shore is after the almighty dollar."

"Oh, I don't mind that." Warner's brain was racing madly. A hick doctor who hadn't recognized him and who was hungry for money. It was absolutely perfect. The driver's license in his pocket bore a phony name, of course—he had carried it for years for just such an emergency as this. And, for the same reason, he was carrying nearly five thousand dollars, in a secret compartment in his wallet. If his hick doctor would only listen to reason. . . .

"Tell you what, old-timer," he said slowly. "I may have to stay here for a while, until the doctor gets through with me. But I'll pay you five dollars for the time I'm here."

"Five dollars a day!" The old mountaineer's voice was hushed with awe.

"That's right. Five a day. But I want you to understand one thing. You're not to mention my being here to anyone. You see, I'm a—a sort of government man."

The old man nodded eagerly. "I figgered that, soon as I seen that .45 you was totin'. Don't you worry one bit, mister. I ain't sayin' a word to *nobody*."

"Fine. And, as soon as the doctor comes tomorrow, I want you to take a walk for a few minutes. Something I want to say to the doctor." Warner's brain was hot with excitement. It could be done, even yet. Once he was free of that trade-mark face of his, he could make his way back to the city, where he had the bulk of his money in a bank, under another name. Nearly a hundred thousand dollars. Once he got his hands on that money, the whole world was before him.

DR. WINTERS came a little before noon the next day, and Warner waited impatiently while he fiddled with bandages. The doctor was a shrunken, beady-eyed little man, almost as unwashed as his host. When he had replaced the bandages, Warner signaled the old mountaineer to withdraw, then pulled out his wallet from beneath his pillow. From it, he took a thousand-dollar bill. Held it up before the doctor.

"I want a little operation done on my face, Doctor," he said slowly. "I want it fixed so I'll look different. And I'm willing to give you this for the operation if you want to do it. I think you know what I mean."

The doctor's beady eyes tightened with excitement as he looked at the bill. "I reckon I could fix you up, sir. It wouldn't be too much of an operation. 'Course, we ain't got much in the way of a hospital, but—"

"No hospital," Warner said curtly. "I want the operation done right here, in this cabin. And nobody with you except the old-timer. I have my reasons."

The doctor started to protest. Then he glanced again at the thousand-dollar bill and slowly nodded his head.

"Good." Warner's voice showed his relief. "When can you do it, Doctor?"

"In about a week, I reckon. . . ."

* * *

The long days dragged by interminably.

The operation, Dr. Winters assured him, had been a success, but it would be some time before the bandages could be removed.

Just before the operation had started, Dr. Winters had swung up a small camera and snapped a picture of his face. It had happened so quickly that Warner had not had time to stop him.

"What's the idea of that?" he growled.

The doctor had looked at him in surprise. "Why, because I want you to see the difference in your face now and when I'm through with it," he said blandly. "Don't worry, I won't show the picture to anybody."

Stephen Warner had wanted to protest but had thought better of it. After all, it probably *was* just vanity on the old fool's part, and too much depended on this man to antagonize him needlessly. He waited impatiently for the day to come when the bandages could be removed.

When that day finally came, he was glad he had not aroused the doctor's suspicions. A day or two more, and he could be on his way, back to the city and his money. And then. . . . He waited impatiently while the old doctor laid a cheap hand mirror on the bed beside him and leisurely started to remove the bandages. When the last one was removed, Dr. Winters stood back and looked at him with satisfaction.

"Hmm. Not bad," he remarked smugly. "Not bad at all. No, sir, I bet one of them high-priced city specialists couldn'ta done a better job. No, siree!"

Warner snatched up the mirror with hands that were shaking like leaves. He held it before his face and almost shrieked aloud in his anguish. Why, the damn old fool had not done one thing to his face! No, that was not quite true. The lines the scalpel had cut were still raw and there was a large patch of his face that was a slightly different shade than the rest. But the features were still the same. It was still the same, open, trustworthy face that was being hunted from coast to coast!

"Say!" Dr. Winter's voice was suddenly cold and sharp. "Ain't I seen you somewhere before?

Warner looked up quickly. The old doctor was standing before him, peering intently at his face. Back of him, the bearded mountaineer was leaning forward.

"Why, sure I have," the doctor went on excitedly. "You're that feller that run that phony school, up north. The same feller that killed them two people. I know you now!"

"Yes, and a lot of good it's going to do you, you blundering old fool!" Stephen Warner screamed.

He hurled the mirror straight at the old man, then twisted around and snatched the .45 from under his pillow. The red haze was before him again and he slowly raised the big gun, started to squeeze the trigger.

There was a blasting roar from across the cabin, and he saw the big gun leap from his hand, felt his whole arm go numb. He looked around dully. The bearded mountaineer was standing out in the middle of the room, a rifle in his hand and smoke was curling up lazily from the muzzle.

"I *thought* that five dollars a day was too good to be true," the old fellow said sadly. "Reckon you can hold him here while I go over and get the sheriff, Doc?"

"Don't see why not," Dr. Winters replied abstractedly. His forehead was wrinkled in concentration. Suddenly he threw back his head and began laughing!

"I got it all figgered out now," he gasped, between howls of laughter. "Here I was, thinking you wanted me to graft some new skin on your face so them burns wouldn't show, and all the time you was wantin' me to do one of them plastic surgery jobs, so nobody would know who you was."

"And what's so damn funny about that?" Stephen Warner asked sourly.

Old Dr. Winters went on laughing and wiping the tears out of his eyes. "Why, you durn fool, you already *had* a plastic job done on your face—a better job, for your purpose, than the finest specialist in the world could have done. Here. Take a look at this!"

He handed Warner the snapshot he had taken, before beginning the operation.

The snapshot was that of a face seared and twisted by fire until it bore no slightest resemblance to his own. His own mother wouldn't have recognized him with that face.

But they'd recognize him now, he realized dully. Anybody would know him now. That face of his was his trademark.

Master MANHUNTERS

by Ben Nelson & Stookie Allen

NEMESIS OF THE BLACK HAND

JOE PETROSINO CAME TO AMERICA AS A BOY HARPIST PRODIGY, JOINED THE NEW YORK POLICE AT 18, AND BECAME A LEGEND.

WHEN A WAVE OF MURDERS, EXTORTIONS AND BOMBINGS BY BLACK HAND TERRORISTS OF THE DREAD MAFIA AND CAMORRA SWEPT THE FOREIGN COLONY, PETROSINO TOOK COMMAND OF THE FOREIGN SQUAD.

UTTERLY FEARLESS, THE SQUAT DETECTIVE IN THE HIGH-CROWNED DERBY ONCE STALKED INTO A CAFE AND ARRESTED ENRICO ALFANO, KING OF THE CAMORRA, SITTING WITH HIS ARMED FOLLOWERS.

ADEPT AT DIALECTS AND DISGUISE, JOE PUT ON CAP, BANDANNA AND VACANT EXPRESSION AND SECURED EVIDENCE ON WHICH TERRORISTS WERE DEPORTED WHOLESALE, SENT TO PRISON AND ELECTROCUTED.

MARKED FOR DEATH, IN 1909, HE WENT TO PALMERO, SICILY, HOTBED OF THE MAFIA, TO CHECK ON SUSPECTS. A MAN STOPPED HIM OUTSIDE A CAFE WHILE ANOTHER CREPT UP AND SHOT HIM MORTALLY IN THE BACK.

TWO DOWN—ONE TO DIE!

By JAMES G. MacCORMACK

IN HIS richly appointed apartment in London's fashionable West End, Dudley Ash, internationally famous art collector, lay amidst his treasures, dead, his throat an ugly red gash.

At approximately the time Scotland Yard was faced with this horrible crime, New York police were trying to make up their minds as to whether the beautiful young blonde dope addict, found in her East Seventy-fourth Street apartment, from an overdose of her favorite morphine, had died by her own hand—or had been murdered.

Two days after the discovery of Emmeline Ferris' body, the New York police were convinced that Miss Ferris had been murdered. A letter had been received, postmarked London. It said: ". . . I'm convinced that I am to be murdered, either tonight or tomorrow. Both you and Alfred will be killed also, I fear, as soon as Harkness and his crowd can get to New York after popping me off . . . Dudley."

The New York police cabled Scotland Yard: "Who is Dudley, St. James Mansion, Victoria St. S.W., London?" They also mentioned the letter.

Within an hour, they received this reply: "Dudley Ash, art collector, killed by having his throat cut the night letter mailed to Emmeline Ferris. No clue to slayers."

Two dead, one to go.

What had been a routine killing of an attractive girl with no visible means of support took on a new light. Her case now attracted New York's top detectives.

There was very little to go on. Outside of a few personal effects, the girl had left nothing that could give a lead. The most unusual thing in her possession was her hypodermic case. The glass syringe and needle were normal enough, but the case was made of gold and embossed with diamonds. Even more curious was the beautiful little miniature painting on the inside bottom of the case. It was a scene of an old man sitting on the steps of an Old World cathedral, feeding sparrows which were perched on his elbows and knees. Not having an art critic on the force, the New York police found little to help them in the scene.

A high police official showed the hypo case to August Mayer, a New York private eye who had worked on several cases with the police before. Mayer, something of an amateur ornithologist, remarked, "A funny thing about birds, they trust some people . . . won't have anything to do with others. . . ." This profound statement was no help at all.

The bird the police sought seemingly had no liking for cages, and although they salted the tail of a few, they were always the wrong birds.

On a spring day in 1925, two years after the death of Miss Ferris, August Mayer was in Genoa, Italy, on a government mission. He was trying to secure the aid of Italian police, in preventing criminals coming from that country to the United States.

While waiting to meet some officials in Genoa one day, Mayer took a stroll down the Ave Garibaldi. At the end of the street he saw the cathedral of the Annunziata. The beauty of the ancient structure attracted him, and he hurried on.

As he drew close he noticed an old man in shabby clothes feeding sparrows that perched on his elbows and knees. Mayer turned from tourist to detective. His mind went back to a miniature painting he had seen two years before. An old man feeding sparrows on the steps of an Old World church. Emmeline Ferris's hypodermic case! The murdered woman . . . could she have lived here?

The detective hurried to the superintendent of the Genoese police. He explained what he had seen, its possible meaning. He asked for an interpreter to help him talk to the old man.

Signor Davotte, the superintendent himself, went along with Mayer. The Italian official was familiar with the habits of the oldster.

"The birds are harbingers of good and

Amateur detective August Mayer had three clues to work with, in solving Emmeline Ferris' death: Two corpses—and a little gold case that pointed four thousand miles from the scene of the crime!

evil—at least, so the old man believes," Signor Davotte explained. "If the birds stay when a stranger approaches, the old man will talk to him. If they fly away, he will not."

The sparrows remained when the two men arrived. The Genose police chief asked, "Matteo, do you remember a young blonde girl who painted you feeding the sparrows?"

"Yes," the old man replied. "It was four years ago. She was very sweet, and how the birds loved her."

Matteo was then told that the girl had been murdered. His somber, dark eyes became very sad. Reassured that he was not under suspicion, the old man led the policemen to the house where the girl had stayed those years before.

THEY STOPPED in front of an evil-smelling little door. A fat, blowsy old woman answered their knock. She cursed Matteo for bringing strangers to her house.

The sharpness of her tongue dulled considerably when she learned her visitors were policemen. Mayer asked the landlady if she had ever known Emmeline Ferris. Yes, she had lived there for some time, two or three years ago. The detective then informed the landlady that her former guest had been murdered.

"Madonna mia, Matra Dia!" the old lady cried. Then she told what she knew.

Emmeline Ferris had been a dancer at a fashionable night spot in London—Ciro's, to be exact. There she met a smooth underworld character named Harkness. He had cheap-talked her into trying drugs for kicks. She had become addicted to the needle—and to Harkness.

Once she was completely within his power, Harkness used her as his lure in blackmailing several gentlemen with fat purses and loose morals.

One of her victims was Dudley Ash, wealthy art collector in London. Despite Harkness and the threat of blackmail, Ash fell in love with Emmeline. And she, in turn, fell in love with Dudley Ash.

Emmeline was still under Harkness' influence, and she feared breaking with him. Ash tried to reason with Harkness, and to this end met the backmailer in Paris. There, Harkness agreed to let Emmeline go—for a price. Ash had Harkness' agreement legalized by his friend, Alfred, an American attorney, who had accompanied him to the Paris rendezvous.

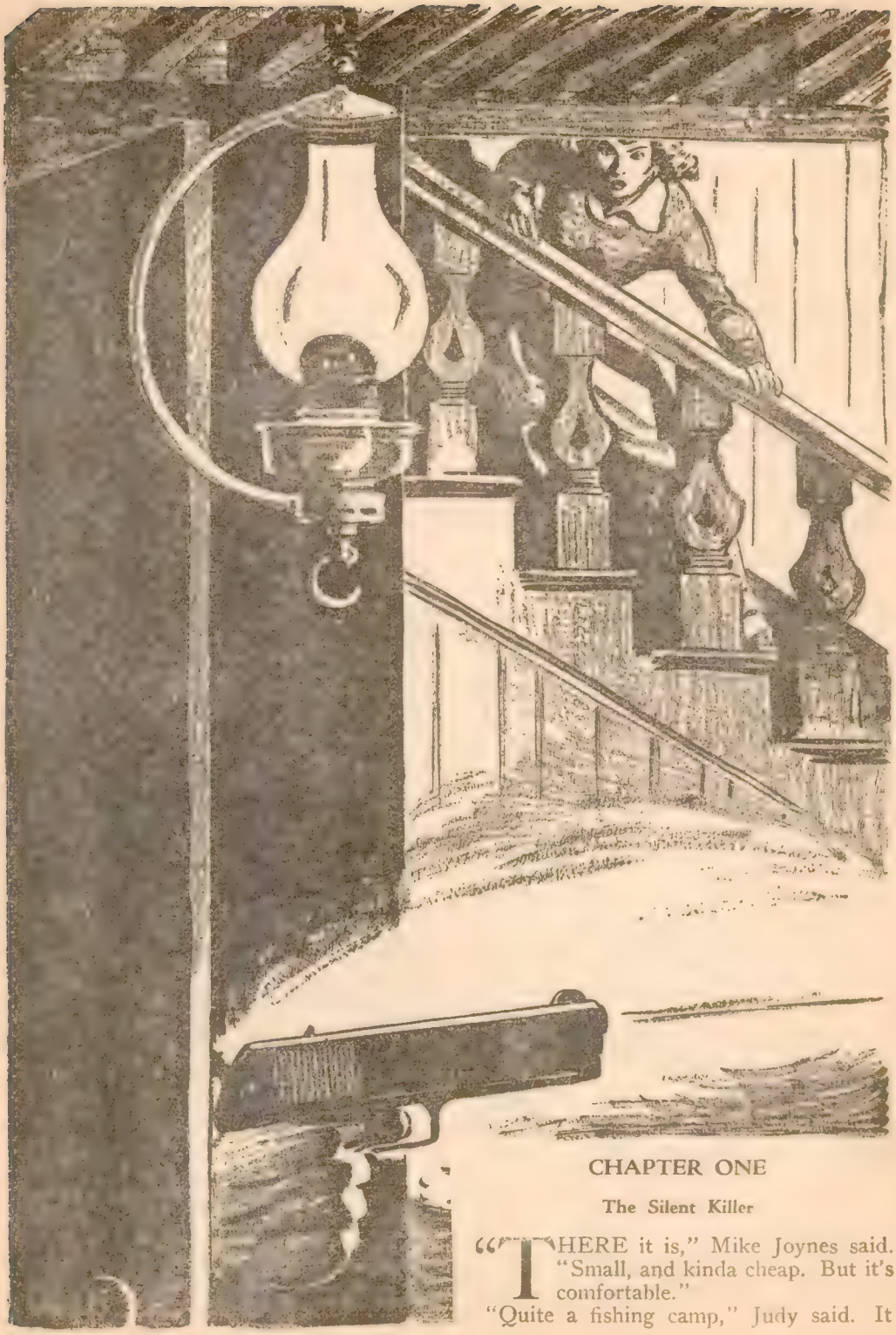
It was a joyous reunion Ash held with his love when he returned to London. She would first go to Genoa for a rest away from all her friends, then she was to take a boat for America, get medical care for her addiction, and await Ash, who would join her there as soon as he wound up his business affairs in England.

But Harkness had no idea of keeping his side of the bargain. He soon began to pester Ash for more money. Ash refused, and died.

The old Genoese landlady's story led to the arrest of the killers. Harkness was caught in Berne, Switzerland. His hired

She had already blackmailed several gentlemen with fat purses and loose morals.

hand who had pumped the overdose into Emmeline Ferris was caught in London, and other members of his shake-down crew were caught in Europe and the Orient. Harkness was tried in Old Bailey, London, for Ash's murder, and hanged. Alfred, the third marked for murder, was never harmed.



CHAPTER ONE

The Silent Killer

"THERE it is," Mike Joynes said. "Small, and kinda cheap. But it's comfortable."

"Quite a fishing camp," Judy said. It

DARK AS ANY GRAVE

Compelling Homicide Novelette

By WYATT BLASSINGAME

"Wait!" Mike cried, his voice high and thin. "If it's the money—"

It would be a quiet weekend, Mike Joynes had told Judy. Just a few guests, and plenty of work. But Mike hadn't counted on the violent tropical storm that would bar every guest save one—his killer!

was built on the top of an ancient Indian shellmound, the highest point in all that country for miles about. It was pink and gaudy even under the grey, rain-sogged sky. In front of it a terraced lawn sloped down to the river which was more like a lake, the water black and still. Behind it were garages and guest houses and the luxuriance of well-tended tropical growth. Held back from all of this—wet, crouching, it seemed to Judy, like some great animal waiting to spring—was the vast, desolate prairie, the dark water of the river that merged with the eternal mystery of the Everglades.

"Cheap," Judy said. "And all for a little more than eighty thousand dollars."

Mike Joynes grinned at her. "I can't impress you. You know too much about my business."

"That's what I'm hired for." She knew what the place had cost because she kept the books. She knew where the money had come from: gambling in South Florida's biggest cities, vice, liquor. She knew almost everything there was to know about Mike Joynes' business. Not everything, but almost. And about Mike Joynes himself she knew a great deal. He was a big, rough, handsome man, easy-going on the surface, smarter than he appeared, ruthless when crossed. She knew that he had given huge sums to charity, that he had helped friends over rough spots, asking nothing but thanks in return. She knew also that he was capable of lying, cheating—even murder, possibly. About murder she wasn't sure, but she guessed.

THEY WENT over a shell drive that curved between great banks of hybiscus and on to the garages. Mike Joynes stopped the car, and for a moment they sat there. There had been much rain and there would be more soon, but now the air was still, heavy with a stillness so deep that it seemed impossible to breathe in. The stillness beat at her ears as if it were sound.

"I thought there were going to be other people here," Judy said.

Joynes opened the car door, got out. "They'll be along later."

Judy didn't move. "We talked about this at the office. This was business, strictly."

He was taking their bags out of the back, and he raised his head to grin at her. "You stick to that, don't you? All right. There's plenty of work to be done. You know that."

"When are the others coming?"

"In time for dinner."

She got out of the car then and went with him. He showed her about the house with a kind of boyish pride that made her more gentle with her remarks than she would have been otherwise. "Rich," she said, "and gaudy."

His glance was quick. "Is it too flashy?"

She started to say that it looked more like one of his night clubs than a fishing camp, but instead said only that it was very pretty. Finally he showed her the room where she was to stay. "If there is anything you want—" he said.

"For you to run along. I'll be down in a few minutes, and we'll start work on those accounts."

"Sometimes," Mike said, "I ain't sure you're human." But he went out, closing the door behind him.

She put her weekend bag on the bed and opened it, then turned away and stood looking out the window. The rain had started again, but she could see across the lawn to a dock where small boats were tied. At the dock's end began another world, she thought. The water, dark and still, with alligators and snakes in it, Mike Joynes had said proudly. The water coiling off through half-submerged islands as untouched and primitive as they had been a thousand years ago.

It oppressed her strangely and she turned back to the room. Here she was affronted by the evidence of too much money and too little taste. *Although most of Mike's girls should be tremendously impressed with it,* she thought. She was not one of Mike's girls. She had worked for him for three years now, but she'd never had a date with him. Not that Mike hadn't made his tries. He liked pretty women, and anything that was hard to obtain intrigued him especially. He liked to conquer: money, business, women. But she had managed to keep their relations on a strictly business basis—until now.

Yesterday Mike had said, "Dave Elton wants to buy the Coconut Club for one hundred grand."

From the tone of his voice she knew he was thinking about it, trying to figure it

out. She said, "You've got that much in the building and equipment. And last season you took better than five thousand a week profit from the place. It doesn't sound like much of an offer to me."

"I know. . . ." He frowned. "But Elton's got a better tie-in with the sheriff and state's attorney than I have. He may be fronting for them. If I don't sell, the odds are they'll try to close me."

"Well?"

"Conrad wants to sell." Conrad Thies was Mike's business partner and most of their places were jointly owned. After a pause. Mike Joynes said, "I've got to know a lot of figures before I decide." He looked straight at her then. "As the head of my figure department, sugar, you've got work to do."

That was when he asked her to go with him to his fishing lodge. The deal, he said, would be closed or dropped over the weekend, and he would need her help as his chief accountant. "Hell," he'd said, "you act as though you don't trust me."

"I don't."

He laughed. Then his laughter stopped and he said, "I pay you a big salary, sugar. For that much money I figure you can take the chance."

So she had come. She was no high-school girl, she told herself now, who had gone on a date with a married man for a thrill. She was old enough to know the world. She prided herself on being tough and worldly wise. She could take care of herself. And yet . . . she was conscious of nervousness and told herself it was the place, the vast stillness which brooded over it. Mike Joynes would be no different here than he had been in the city.

In her bag there was a small, pearl-handled automatic. Mike had given it to her two years before. "Anybody who knows as much about my business as you do might need a gun," he'd said. She picked it up now and looked at it. She had never fired it. But she knew how; she could use it if she had to. She put it back in her bag and left the room.

When she came downstairs Mike was already at work. "I want to know how much protection is costing us now," he said. "Percentage of profit on investment in the Coconut Club against the others. Everything."

SHE WAS good at her work. In a way she even took pleasure in it, and now time passed more rapidly than she realized. She dug out the figures and read them to Mike Joynes as she got them, and he walked restlessly about or sat with his feet on the window sill, listening. It was much later when she said, "It comes out this way no matter how I figure it, Mike."

"What?"

"For ten weeks now, five thousand a week has been disappearing from the Coconut Club. Not profit, but operating expenses. Vanishing."

He did not take his feet off the sill, but his head turned until he was looking at her. "Vanishing where?"

"I don't know."

"Who's getting it?"

It was the question she had been waiting for. She met his eyes, blank in his square, blank face. "I can't say, Mike. Except that it has to be one of two men. It has to be you or Mr. Thies. Nobody else could get it."

"Well . . ." Mike said. His eyes, she thought, were like the eyes of a fish, flat and without life. And then he began to smile. "Well, well," he said. "That's what I like about you, sugar. You got a genius for figures." He came over and put his hand on her shoulder. "All sorts of figures." He let his hand slide down her arm.

She stood up quickly. And it was then she first realized that darkness had fallen. Wet darkness lay against the windows of the room. She could hear the rain and wind, and nothing else. She swung to look at Mike Joynes and he was smiling at her. "Don't look so startled, sugar."

"Where are the others? You said—"

"Maybe the weather held 'em up. Hell, let's celebrate. Work's over for tonight and my mind's made up." He reached for her and she took a step backward, away from him.

"All right," he said. There was a faint smile on his face. "But we can have a drink. To that fifty thousand that's missing."

"You said a number of persons were coming out tonight, Mike. I'm not going to stay here alone."

"They'll be along. We don't have to wait for them to have a drink."

"In a minute. I want to go to my room

first. I'll be back right away."

She didn't go with the intention of getting the gun. She didn't even intend to look at it; it was just the strange foreboding that had been with her all afternoon that made her think of it. And thinking of it, glancing toward the bag where she had left it, she noticed that some of her clothes had been pulled out onto the bed. She didn't remember leaving them that way—and all at once there was a feel at her throat as though cold fingers had touched her.

Her hands were frantic among the clothes in the bag. But she did not find the gun. The gun was gone now.

Mike Joynes had taken it; she knew that because no one else could have done it. While she had been working, Mike had wandered about the house. She had heard him go upstairs but had paid no attention at the time. Now. . . .

She made herself walk slowly across the room to the window, and look out into darkness. She made her breathing steady. There was no need for panic. She was a successful business woman, not a child to be frightened by wild fancies. Mike had taken the gun because he had some use for it; then in the midst of their work he had forgotten to mention it. That was all. She tried not to wonder what he wanted with the gun. To clean it, perhaps. . . .

The thing to do was to ask him, she thought, and went to the door and opened it. When she did, she heard his voice. He was downstairs, in the kitchen at the back of the house, so she could not understand what he said. The voice that answered him was so soft, so low, she could not even tell if it was a man or a woman.

She felt like laughing, and she closed the door, going back into her room. The other people had come just as Mike had said they would. She had been getting hysterical over something imagined, and she felt half ashamed of herself now.

In her bathroom she remade her face, combed her hair. And when she opened her hall door again she was moving casually, humming to herself. She expected voices and so at first did not notice them. Then the tone of Mike's voice stopped her.

"Wait!" he was saying. "Wait! You damned fool! Don't—"

Judy was at the head of the stairs now, and looking downward she saw Mike. He was staring toward the rear of the house, his face drawn and bloodless, but Judy could not see the person he stared at.

"Wait!" Mike cried again. His voice was thin and high. He had a full glass in each hand and Judy could see the light shimmer on them, hear the tinkle of ice even. "If it's the money, why—"

The gun stopped him, the two shots so close they blurred into one. She saw Mike rock, take a quick step backward. The glasses slipped out of his hands although his fingers were still cupped as though holding them. The glasses broke on the floor and liquor and ice ran in a pool about his feet. And still he stood there, swaying a little now. As he swayed his head came back so that he looked up the stairs and saw Judy.

"Judy—" She saw his mouth move and he had spoken her name although there was no sound. He kept looking up at her. Then his knees gave way as though he were tired, and he went down on his knees, then on hands and knees, then on his face.

SILENCE thundered down on the house. The house seemed to rock and sway in violent stillness. The person downstairs, the person who had killed Mike Joynes, had not moved, and Judy stood at the top of the stairway, clinging to the bannister, waiting. . . .

Below her, the murderer moved. She could hear the steps, light, fragile, the killer moving on tiptoe. Because the killer knew she was there. The killer had seen Mike Joynes stare up at her and say her name.

The killer came forward along the hallway, each step separate, each sound clean-cut upon the stillness. In another three seconds the murderer would be at the foot of the stairway and Judy could see—and be seen.

Two seconds. . . . One. . . .

She screamed. The cry was like an animate thing left in the hallway as she whirled and ran. Terror lashed her. She snatched open the door of her room, slammed it shut behind her. Her hand groped for the key—and there was no key! There had been a key earlier, but it was gone! Mike Joynes had taken it when he took her gun.

She clung to the doorknob. Her breathing and her heartbeats thundered in her ears. And through this, soft and clear, it seemed, she could hear the steps of the

killer, coming up the stairway, coming one step at a time, not fast, not slow, but steady and irresistible as the movement of time itself.

She spun away from the door, ran across the room, threw open a window. Wind and rain touched her face. Darkness lapped at her. But she could see dimly a porch roof sloping downward, glinting in the wet dark.

There was no memory of climbing through the window. She was outside with the window shut behind her and her high-heeled shoes slipping on the roof. She kicked the shoes off, not seeing in the darkness where they went, not caring. Then she was at the roof's edge with only darkness below her.

She tried to hang by her fingers but they slipped on the slanting roof and she was falling. It seemed that she fell a long way, yet the shock of striking the earth was not too great. Pain stabbed at her ankle and leg, but was drowned in fear. She was on her feet again and running.

Then all at once there was water around, almost to her knees. She floundered in it and fell and got erect again. She must have run into the river, she thought wildly. But she had believed she was running off to the left, parallel to the river. Water shouldn't be here.

She turned, stumbling in the water. The house should be in this direction, she thought. But there was only darkness. She turned slowly, turned in a complete circle, and she could see nothing. The dark and the rain pressed against her eyeballs. The house had vanished completely.

But she couldn't have come that far, she thought. How long had she run? Only a few moments. Then where, how . . . ? Perhaps trees, or one of the unlighted guest houses blocked her view and if she went a few steps in any direction she would be clear and could see.

The water got deeper with each step. It was up to her knees, above them. Mud sucked at her bare feet and she began to flounder backward, quickly. Behind her something huge slashed at the water and was gone.

Alligators, she thought. Mike Joynes had said there were alligators. And snakes.

Sheet lightning trembled in the sky, a grey quivering beyond the grey rain. It was like a curtain on which she saw painted dark water stretching to the world's rim. Water and nothing else.

Blind panic caught her then. She wanted to spin around and run, race away from that vast, dark nothingness. And she fought herself to stillness, made herself think. She stood, fighting herself, trembling, staying where she was until she had control of her panic. Because if she ran in the wrong direction, if she floundered into water over her head, and in this darkness, she might never find the bank again.

Slowly she began to move, putting her feet down cautiously. The earth seemed to squirm, to come alive under her bare feet. But she had to move, to keep moving. She tried to force herself to think of moving, of the dirt under her feet, and nothing else. Because at the edge of her mind there was always the thought of things in the darkness, the things Mike Joynes had said lived here.

The lightning came again, behind her now, but flowing greyly over her. And against the far night she saw the house. There were no lights in it, just the house, big and towering upon the sky and vanishing as the lightning vanished.

Moments later there was another light. It stabbed at the night, swung, moved slowly, and was gone again. An automobile had driven away from Mike Joynes' fishing lodge. The killer had gone.

CHAPTER TWO

The Latecomers

RELIEF that was almost like pain flooded through Judy now. She knew the direction of the house, and it would be safe to go there. She began to walk more rapidly, the earth getting firmer under her feet, the water shallower. Then there was no water at all, except the wetness of rain. When the lightning came again she could see the house not more than a hundred feet away.

As the lightning went out she saw the other thing. She had just a glimpse of it from the corner of her eye, but horror froze her where she stood. A scream rose and choked in her throat.

It had been a snake, or two snakes, not a yard from her ankles!

The horror thawed, and her brain started

to work again. Probably it had been an illusion. A tree limb lying on the ground. An old rope. Just glimpsed by the vanishing light, and with her nerves stretched to the point of hysteria, the most harmless thing would be contorted by her imagination. She told herself this; she struggled with her mind as with a live, fighting thing, fighting with it until she subdued it. Then she began to move again, up the slope toward the house.

Now the lightning came again, washing over the wet earth. And she saw that there *were* snakes! The earth was alive, twisting, creeping with life. Snakes, a rabbit, a deer! The lightning flowed over them all around her, closing in on her. Then the darkness struck again.

She ran. She was mad, and she ran from madness toward the house as toward sanctuary. She heard things thrash about her, and then she was at the house and had found a door and was inside in the darkness, crowding herself into a corner between walls, sobbing.

Somehow she got control of her mind again. She felt through the darkness and found a light switch and turned it on.

She was in the kitchen. It was clean and shiny, with every gadget that could be bought. On the tiled sink there was a liquor bottle and a tray of melting ice cubes. It was the ice cubes her mind clung to as to a kind of life preserver, a promise of sanity. Because Mike Joynes had got out those cubes to make the drinks. And they were not yet melted. Too many things could not have happened in so short a time.

She went out of the kitchen, turning on lights as she went. She did not need to go beyond the rear of the hall. From here she could see Mike, face down upon the floor, the puddle of spilled liquor about him. And on the floor, close to him, was a gun.

She went toward it slowly. Her heart ached. Breath clogged in her throat and she was drawn slowly, as by something she could not resist.

The gun on the floor was her own gun, the gun Mike had given her two years ago. A gun registered in her name.

* * *

How long she huddled in the room where earlier she and Mike had worked she did not know. Perhaps she fainted; perhaps she was unconscious for a while. She did not know. It was the wet coldness of her clothes that brought her around, made her aware that she could not stay here forever.

She stood up—and as she did, pain ran through her leg so that she almost fell. She had to sit down again, and she saw then that her left ankle was slightly swollen. She had turned it in jumping from the roof. It was not a bad sprain and until now, in her terror, she had not noticed it. But now stiffness had set in and she had to move carefully.

Well, she could get to Mike's car and get away.

But she had not reached the door when car lights shone for an instant against a window. The lights swung as the car came toward the back of the house, moved up close.

The murderer! It was the one thought that occurred to her. She had to get away—and she couldn't. Then she thought of the gun which still lay in the hall near Mike's body. If she could get that. . . .

There was no time. As she reached the door she heard a man shout, "Hey! Anybody here? Hello!" There were quick steps, then the back door banged shut. A man came through the kitchen and saw her.

It was Billy Birbeck, who had been Joynes' bodyguard. He said, "Hell's broke loose! Dam on Big Lake's broke and the whole country's flooding. And all the damn snakes and coons in the world—" He stopped, staring at Judy. "What's wrong with you? You look like you been swimming with your clothes on."

"I—" She had to cling to the doorsill. It was relief at seeing a face she knew, hearing a human voice. She had never liked this man with his too-smooth, almost little-boy's face, a face handsome to the point of being pretty, pink and young, and marred somehow by the cruelty that showed in his thin mouth and eyes. She had heard him tell stories of when he had been in the Marines, of deliberately murdering prisoners; she knew that he had killed a man since he came to work for Joynes, though whether that was murder or self-defense she did not know. She knew that he was cruel—but now the sight of him was familiar and reassuring.

"What the hell's happened?" he said. "Where's Mr. Joynes?"

"He—" She could only point toward the

hallway. Birbeck went past her; she heard him stop moving, the sharp sound of his breath. Then his shoes moved again, on down the hallway, and stopped.

HE CAME back to her. He stood in front of her and his face was very pale and harsh. She could hear his breathing. "Why did you kill him?"

"No. . . . I didn't!"

"Don't lie. It's your gun."

"I know. But I—"

He slapped her. The blow knocked her away from the door, and her bad ankle crumpled under her and she fell. "Damn you!" he snarled and leaned and caught her by the shoulder, half lifting her.

"I didn't!" It was all she could say, too weak now even to fight. And after a moment he half dragged her to a chair and dropped her into it.

"All right," he said. "Now tell me what happened. Tell me the truth. Why did you—" He stopped, turning quickly away. The lights of another car had shown in the yard, moving slowly through the rain, coming closer to the house.

Birbeck moved to one side of the window and his hand went under his raincoat, came out with a gun. To Judy he said, "Who is it?"

"I don't know."

"We'll see soon enough." He had a way of moving that always frightened Judy, a controlled, almost violent grace, like a cat stalking a bird. He placed himself where the half-open door sheltered him and where he could see from behind the door into the back room and hall, and where, at the same time, he could watch Judy.

The newcomer knocked at the back door, opened it and came inside. But there was no other sound. After a few moments he knocked again, hard.

Judy heard his steps go across the room then, into the hall. A voice called, "Hello! Mr. Joynes!" The sound faded out; the steps moved again—and stopped. Judy knew that he had found Mike Joynes' body.

Birbeck waited. The steps moved back down the hall, to the half-open door. Now Birbeck could see the person, Judy thought.

Then Judy could see him. He stood there in the doorway, looking at her, a man of about average size, wearing a trench-coat splotched with rain. He carried a felt hat in his hand; his hair was a cross between blond and red, and not too well combed. His face was wind roughened, blunt featured, and would have been good humored in repose. He stood and looked at her, at the condition of her hair and clothes and the way she huddled in the chair.

"Hello," he said.

She looked back at him. He said, "I don't know who's back of this door. The same fellow who put the handprint on your face, probably. But I wish you'd tell him not to do anything violent."

"A cutie," Birbeck said. He stepped from behind the door, but not close to the other man. He held his gun low and in the manner of a man who knew how to use it—and would. "Turn around," he said.

The other man turned, raising his hands shoulder high. "I don't carry a gun," he said.

Birbeck patted him with his left hand, then stepped back, frowning. "Who the hell are you?"

"Mind if I turn around?" The man turned without waiting for an answer. He said, "My name's Shaw. Thomas L. Shaw. Treasury Department. I wished to talk," he said, "to Mr. Joynes about last year's income tax. It seems I'm late."

Nobody answered him, and Shaw said, "I should have been here earlier. But evidently there's a flood somewhere; I couldn't move ahead very fast and I was afraid to go back. The water seems to be coming up from behind, forcing all the animals to the high ground. Never saw such a collection of snakes and deer and coons and such."

"Part of the dam at Big Lake gave way," Birbeck said. "I heard it early tonight and thought I better come tell Mr. Joynes—along with some other things. They think maybe the whole dam will give way. If it does, all this country, except maybe this place, is going to be under water."

"I see." Tom Shaw said. "So we are stuck here for a while." He flipped his hat onto a chair. He said, "Who killed Mr. Joynes?"

THAT was a question no one seemed able to answer. Telling her story Judy knew that it sounded improbable. Tom

Shaw and Birbeck listened, asking questions now and then. "You came here with Mr. Joynes," Shaw said, "in order to—er—work undisturbed on the books?"

She felt herself flushing and was angry, at him and at herself. "There were other persons due before dark." She told him about the contemplated sale of the Coconut Club. "The sale was to be closed or abandoned over the weekend, after Mr. Thies and the others arrived."

"Was Mike going to sell?" Birbeck asked.

"I don't know. He had decided, but what the decision was I don't know. I'd just—" She stopped.

"Just what?" Shaw asked.

She had been on the verge of telling him about the missing money. But it was none of this man's business, she thought. So she said, "I'd just finished giving him the information he needed."

Birbeck leaned toward her. His face was like that of a handsome, savage child. "You killed him," he snarled. "Always acting so damn hands-offy, but you come out here with him for a weekend, and then he makes a play for you and you kill him. You—"

"I didn't!" She turned from him to Shaw. "I—" He was watching her, his face polite, curious, one sandy eyebrow higher than the other.

"I'm not exactly a policeman," he said. "But my advice would be to tell the truth."

"I told the truth!" She felt trapped, and angry—and very afraid. "I didn't kill him. I—" Shaw's face did not change; the polite, curious, waiting look was still there. And suddenly she was more angry than afraid. "I don't care what you're thinking!" she cried. "I didn't kill him. And I— There were supposed to be— I didn't come with him to—to—"

"Our interest is only in the murder," Tom Shaw said. And then, quite kindly, "You'd best go to your room, Miss Powell, and change your clothes. You might catch cold."

So she was in her room when the others arrived. She heard shouting out front, saw a light swept over the house and back again.

Looking from the window, she saw the lawn bathed in the glare of a searchlight, though the light was dimmed by the falling rain. And everywhere there were animals. They faced toward the light and moved backward, crawled, jumped, writhed, but did not go swiftly nor fight with one another. The river was halfway up the lawn and at the edge of it there was a boat from which two men and a woman were wading ashore.

She could recognize Conrad Thies, who had been Mike Joynes' business partner. And Myra Wagner, who had been a chorus girl and model and one of Mike Joynes' girls. The other man she did not know. He must be, she thought, the one who wanted to buy the Coconut Club, Dave Elton.

When she came downstairs, limping a little, Joynes' body had been covered over but not moved. The others were in the large front room. She could hear their voices, hear Myra Wagner saying shrilly, "The tramp! Of course she killed him! Who else could have?"

And Tom Shaw's easy voice, "As I understand it, any of you could have killed him."

Judy went in then, and they all turned to stare at her. But no one spoke except Shaw, his voice pleasantly casual. "We are having drinks, Miss Powell. I think you need one." There were bottles and ice on the table, and as he mixed her drink, he said, "Your place is only a mile up the river, isn't it, Mr. Thies? And under the circumstances any of you could have come down in a boat."

Conrad Thies was a small, dark man. There was always something furtive about him. After a moment he said, "I ain't sure what authority you got around here, Mr. Shaw."

"None, actually. Not in connection with the murder. But it seems best that somebody take over and have statements ready for the police. Of course, you don't have to answer."

"All right," Thies said. "I live up the river. So what?"

"What time tonight were you supposed to call on Mr. Joynes and settle your deal?"

"No time."

"What?"

It was Dave Elton who answered. "I hadn't planned to call on Mr. Thies or Mr. Joynes until tomorrow. It was just accident that Miss Wagner and I drove out this afternoon and were caught in the flood."

"And none of you were supposed to call on Joynes until tomorrow?"

"Of course not."

"But—" Judy stopped, understanding what that meant. Mike had not planned to have anyone here tonight, except her. She saw Shaw's gaze, curious, detached, study her for a moment.

Then Bill Birbeck said, "It was a hell of an accident that you came out this afternoon, Mr. Elton. With Myra. She's been two-timing Mike and she was trying to help you sell Mr. Thies on the deal of cutting Mike's throat."

Dave Elton regarded him calmly. Elton was a big, ruddy man, wearing fishing clothes and at ease in them, like a successful banker on his customary outdoor vacation. There was a feel of power about him. He said, "Mr. Birbeck, you have built a reputation as a professional murderer, but don't try to impress me with that fact. Under the circumstances it might behoove you to keep quiet."

They looked at one another: Elton quite at ease, Birbeck's face pale and savage and controlled. "A big shot," Birbeck said softly. "A real hell-on-wheels big shot." Then he lifted his glass and took a long, slow drink from it.

CHAPTER THREE

Trapped

JUDY lay in her bed in the soft, thick darkness and listened to the catfooted rain against roof and window. Everyone in the house believed she had killed Mike Joynes, she thought—everyone except the person who really had killed him. Because the murderer must be one of these people. The murderer must be under the roof with her now.

She trembled a little, lying there in the soft bed, in the dark. The murderer had tried to kill her once, right after Mike was shot. Would he—or she—try again? Could the killer be sure she had seen nothing that might help convict him?

She put that thought out of her mind. She was safe now. She had moved her bag into another room, one with a key in the door, and she was safe now. Besides, everyone had gone to bed. The house was quiet and dark.

There had been no time, she thought, to tell Mr. Thies about the money which had disappeared, week by week, from the Coconut Club. Mike was the one she had always considered her employer, but after all, he and Mr. Thies had been partner's. And only Mike or Mr. Thies could have taken the money without it showing on the books much sooner. So. . . . Suppose it had been Mr. Thies who took it, and when Mike confronted him with that information. . . . She remembered the last words Mike Joynes had spoken, "If it's the money—" Then the shots had stopped him.

And the record which showed this money was missing, the private books of the Coconut Club and of Mike Joynes' other business were downstairs, in the room where she and Mike had worked—in the room where anyone could get at them!

She had put a flashlight under her pillow before going to bed. Now she clicked it on. The light made a white circle against the near wall and its reflection gave the room a kind of pearl greyness. She could see her robe across the foot of the bed and she pulled it about her, slipped her feet into soft slippers. Her ankle still hurt her, but she could walk all right.

She would go down and lock the room containing the business records. Tomorrow, she would turn them over to Mr. Thies. They were his now. But suppose it was Thies who had killed Mike? It was something she would have to think out tomorrow, in daylight.

The light of her flash moved from step to step ahead of her down the stairs. Already she could see the pale shimmer of the sheet that covered Mike Joynes. She didn't want to look at it, and she couldn't keep from it. She had to go close past it, her back pressed against the banister, then on down the dark hallway, and finally to the door to Mike Joynes' study.

The door was locked. Someone else had locked it and taken the key.

She went back, her slippers quiet in the dark hall. There was nothing else she could do now. She went cautiously past the dim, luminous shadow that was Mike Joynes' body, up the stairs with the circle of her flashlight jerking ahead of her.

Her door was slightly ajar, just as she had left it. She pushed it open and went in, and was closing it behind her when she

became conscious of the breeze, damp and fresh from the outside night.

Her window was open. It had not been open when she had gone downstairs, and now it was open. She knew this even before her light reached across the room and found the window—a thin spatter of rain blowing in, the windowsill and the floor beneath it sprinkled with rain, the water shining in the glow of the flashlight. At the edge of the light, where white and darkness mixed, there was the print of a small, naked foot.

The light moved; it seemed to move of itself, without volition on Judy's part; it touched on two feet, naked, the toes toward her, the heels near the wall. Then the light moved upward to show Myra Wagner, her thin pyjamas damp and clinging, her too-blonde hair wet with rain. Her eyes stared into the light without seeing. Her mouth was open and no sound came from it.

As Judy watched, unable to move, the other girl swayed. She went forward slowly, like a tree blown by the wind. And then she fell.

Between her shoulders was the hilt of a knife. In the glow of the flashlight it made a long black shadow.

Judy did not scream. It seemed to her that she was beyond screaming. She stepped backward and found the door, opened it, and still going backward, went into the hall. She began to call, not aware of the sound of her voice or what she said, until there were lights around her and Tom Shaw had her by the shoulder and Bill Berbeck and Mr. Thies and Dave Elton were all there.

"Easy," Tom Shaw was saying. "All right. You're all right now. What happened?"

She pointed; now that she had stopped making sound she could not speak. Shaw took the flashlight from her, looked, the other men trying to get past him and his shoulders blocking the door. Then he had turned on the light and crossed the room and was kneeling beside Myra Wagner.

He stood up. He went to the window, looking out, sweeping the beam of the flash back and forth. He came back to the door where the other men stood.

"She had been on the roof," he said. "Apparently she came through the window, but the rain has wiped out any tracks that might have been outside." He pushed past them to Judy and stood looking at her with that curious, watchful calmness. "All right," he said. "What happened?"

She told him. They watched her, all of them, with disbelief showing in their eyes. "If that's it," Shaw said, "Miss Wagner must have been stabbed on the roof. Whoever did it, must have tracked water back into his room. You gentlemen stay here. I want to take a look in your rooms."

"Wait a minute." Dave Elton was as polite as Shaw, but his tone was equally certain. "We don't know too much about you, Mr. Shaw. As far as we know, it may have been you who killed her."

"True," Shaw said. "Then all of you, with Miss Powell, take a look at my room. I'll look at yours."

"Fair enough." Elton put his hand on Judy's elbow. "Come on," he said.

They found the windows in Tom Shaw's room open, but the wind was from the opposite direction for these windows and no rain had even dampened the windowsill. Five minutes later Shaw joined them.

Birbeck said, "Well?"

"The windows in your room were open," Shaw said. "A little rain had blown in, but not much. There's no sign that you were in and out. But one of the towels in your bath was quite damp."

"You passed a law against taking a bath?"

"No. It was the same in Mr. Elton's room," Shaw said. "Only Mr. Thies seems to have slept with his windows closed. One window and screen are open in Miss Wagner's room, but there are no footprints. The only prints are those in Miss Powell's room."

"And why not?" Birbeck asked. "She's the one doing the killing."

THAT was all of it for that night. Until dawn they stayed together, watching one another, and with daylight they took Conrad Thies' boat and moved off through a weird, nightmare world of water and treetops and swimming animals. Then there was a state highway, elevated above the flood, automobiles, the city again.

But for Judy the nightmare did not end. Now it was an endless succession of faces, of eyes looking at her with suspicion, accusation, voices saying, "You murdered . . . Why did you murder . . .? We know

why you killed Mr. Joynes, but why the woman . . .? Why? Why?" And her own voice, "No . . . I didn't . . . No . . . No. . ." until her denials made no sense even to her.

From the newspapers her own face looked out at her. *Questioned In Double Killing. Saw Two Die.* And the stories that did everything but accuse her of the murders.

There was respite at last. She knew it was not over. It would never be over, she thought. Never! But the police had made no formal charges yet, and at least she was home, in the small apartment where she lived with her cripple father. And her father's voice, calm and tempered with ancient pain, gave her relief.

It was here Tom Shaw found her. "Sorry to bother you," he said, his voice polite but without any real feeling in it. "However, my work has to go on."

He looked just as he had when Judy first saw him at Mike Joynes', his hat in his hand, his reddish hair not quite combed, that expression of polite, quiet curiosity in his eyes that angered Judy without her knowing why. "What have I to do with your work?" she asked.

"You were Mike Joynes' bookkeeper."

"Yes."

"I'm interested in his books, his income." He looked around the apartment, a frown fanning thin lines out from between his nose. "Not very elaborate," he said, "for a girl making two hundred a week keeping books for a criminal."

The anger flared in her. "What is it to you?"

"Nothing. You just don't seem the type I expected to work for Joynes and I wondered how you spent your money—what it was that made money so important to you."

"How can you know what he paid me?"

"I was the one locked the room with Joynes' books. I even got a brief look at them. But I had been investigating Mr. Joynes before I ever went out there. That's how I recognized his body and knew your name." He shrugged, as if forgetting the personal side of the matter. "The books are still at the lodge. The police went in by boat to—to get Joynes and Miss Wagner. But the water has gone down so we can get in by car again. I'd like for you to go along with me."

The strain of these past days had left her nerves jagged. And the indifference of this man from whom, for some unknown reason, she wanted sympathy, was like a goad. Her voice was shrill. "You go to hell! I won't help you!"

"I doubted if you would." That was all; there was no change of his face.

Then Judy's father came in, propelling his wheelchair with his hands. He said, "Is this Mr. Shaw, Judy?"

She had turned away. "Yes," she said.

Mr. Powell and Shaw shook hands. "Judy's told me, of course, about what happened." Powell said. "She's described everyone who was there, so I thought you must be Shaw." And to Judy, "I think it might be a good thing if you went with Mr. Shaw and gave him any help you can."

"No."

Powell looked at her with his head cocked slightly to one side. His face was gaunt and birdlike. "I don't know whether you're feeling some kind of mistaken loyalty for Mike Joynes, or whether you're just angry. But it might be that working with Mr. Shaw you'd turn up something that would help find who did those killings. You go along with him, Judy."

She went. It was a rented car with the top down, the Florida sun warm and good. The highway ran like the shaft of an arrow through country heavily marked by the flood. Tom Shaw said, "How long has your father been sick, Miss Powell?"

"Ten years. And he doesn't get any better. He—he never will."

"Doctor bills run up, don't they?"

"Just trying to keep him comfortable," Judy said. "And the new things they are always hoping will help, and don't, and—" She stopped, aware of her own voice, and of an eagerness to make this man understand. But he wouldn't understand, she thought. He wouldn't care. Still. . . .

THEY DROVE on and gradually there was a feeling between them that was close to comradeship. Some of the terrible strain and depression of the last few days was gone from Judy; it was a relief to be able to talk now about her work with Mike Joynes. "I knew he was a criminal," she said. "At least, most of his money came from gambling and other things outside the law. He paid me twice as much, three times almost, as I could have made anywhere else. And there was always the hope that with

more money something could be done for Dad. Dad didn't like me working there, but the work I did was honest enough. I thought Mike paid me so much for being honest with him, for holding my tongue. Because there had never been anything except bookkeeping until—" She could feel her face coloring. She said slowly, "He told me there would be other persons at the lodge that night. I had never gone with him before, not even had a date with him. No less to—to spend a weekend."

"I hoped it was that way," Shaw said. "It wasn't any of my business, and what I could see didn't point that way. And I kept hoping, anyhow."

"You believe me then? You don't think I killed him?"

"I believe you," he said. His face was very thoughtful. "But the police don't."

So they drove on, off the main highway and over a road still covered in places by water, and at last to Mike Joynes' lodge.

More than two hours later she had told him about the money missing from the Coconut Club, showed him how only Conrad Thies or Mike could have covered the loss as it had been done. "It must have been taken in cash," she said. "Anyone of a number of persons could have picked up the money, brought it to them, but only Mike or Mr. Thies could have covered the loss in the books this way."

"And you can't tell which one?"

"No."

He began to walk back and forth. "I've had a theory," he said. "And the police went over this place from end to end when they were here. Still—come on!" he said.

"Where?"

"Come on."

They went up the stairs, into the room where Judy had slept. Again there was a sense of dread upon her. She tried not to look toward the spot where Myrn Wagner had lain, but Shaw went quickly across the room and opened a window and screen and looked out. "There's a chance," he said. He took off his shoes and climbed through the window.

She watched him move along the roof, down to the edge, back up to where the porch roof ended against the second story of the house. He went slowly, searching every inch, reaching under and inside the gutters. And then, "Wait!" His voice was sharp. "I think I've found it, maybe."

"What is it?"

At the far end, the roof sloped downward, beams projecting a little beyond it in places. Shaw was on tiptoe, working with one of these. She saw a piece of string dangle. "Ah . . ." Tom Shaw said. He held a cloth bag in his hands. He opened it, and even from where Judy stood looking out the window she could see the green of bills.

From the yard below them a voice said, "So you found it."

Bill Birbeck stood there, the afternoon sunlight on his pale, handsome, vicious face. He held a .45 automatic in his hand and he raised it and said, "You were just too damn smart," and fired.

She heard the clap of the gun. It was unreal, flat, the only sound in a world suddenly frozen and in which one second lasted longer than an hour had before, so that the clap of the gun rested against her ears, tangible, for a long time. Tom Shaw had been moving when the shot was fired, when the world froze, and his motion stopped with it. Hour-long seconds passed and he leanded backward, turned like a man in thick water, and fell. He rolled slowly, awkwardly, his shoulders bumping, arms limp. He rolled over the edge of the porch and out of sight.

In the yard Birbeck moved his gun. The muzzle swung so that Judy could see the black hole of it. "And you—"

Time went mad, lurching into a whirling blur. She was screaming, throwing herself backward, as the bullet smashed into the far wall. She ran. There was a door and she jerked it open and it was the bathroom. She spun away and was outside the room, running down the steps, stumbling, clutching at the rail.

Over the rail's edge she saw Birbeck again, at the rear of the hall. He raised the gun, not fast, taking his time, and he seemed to fade, to disappear through some motion of his own although it was only because she had turned and was running up the stairs again. She was in the same room from which she had run, at the open window, and on the stairs behind her she could hear Birbeck's steps. In front of her was the short slope of roof, the drop, and open lawn beyond. There would be no chance to get away, none at all

She whirled. He was in the hall now, only a few steps from the door, coming fast. She leaped for the bathroom, jerked the door shut, locked it.

Then she knew she was trapped. The only window was small and high and she could not get out of it. On the other side of the door Birbeck was standing.

She heard him go away from the door—to the window, probably, to look out and make sure there was no way for her to escape. He came back to the door then. He knocked, quite gently, politely almost. He said, "Come on out, Miss Powell."

She backed away from the door, backed to one side. Her breathing hurt, her eyes hurt with staring. Then came the shock of the gun and she saw the hole tear through the door. The bullet struck the far wall, and shattered bits of tile tinkled on the floor.

"This one does it," Birbeck's voice said and there was the crash of the gun.

The lockplate burst free. The door swayed open. She saw Birbeck's hand come through the crack of the door.

Then Birbeck came in, head first, falling face down on the floor. Behind him stood Tom Shaw, the butt of a heavy fishing rod in his hand. His left shoulder was stained with blood and he swayed a little.

"I think even the police will believe now," he said. Then the strength went out of him and he sat down.

THE BANDAGE made Tom Shaw's shoulder look bulky under his coat and he had to keep his left arm across his waist. Mr. Powell said, "We're a fine pair of invalids for Judy to be looking after."

"I don't mind," Judy said. "If Tom will go on with his story."

"That's most of it, as the cops got it from Birbeck. He knew about the fifty thousand because he had been the one to pick up the money each week and take it to Mike Joynes; then, as you said, Joynes doctored the books to cover up. According to Birbeck he hadn't gone to the lodge to kill. It was really to tell Joynes about the flood and about his former girl friend. Birbeck had seen her with Dave Elton and thought she was doing a little double-crossing. But when Birbeck got to the lodge Mike told him to scram."

Shaw took a pull on his cigarette and his mouth was bent upward in a grin. "It seems," he said, "Mike didn't want to be disturbed at that time."

Judy flushed. "He—"

"We know," Shaw said. "Anyway, he was brusque with Birbeck which brought on an argument. Birbeck wanted a cut of the fifty grand and what Mike gave him was very little. Still, it showed him where the money was and where your gun was. Mike must have lifted that earlier—to be on the safe side."

"I'd always known he was capable of such a thing," Judy said. "Yet I—I never really believed it."

"He was a crook," Mr. Powell said. "I told you not to work for him. I shouldn't have let you." He looked at Shaw. "It was for me. I shouldn't—"

"Let's forget it," Judy said.

"Well," Shaw said, "when Birbeck had a chance at your gun, and the money—and with no one knowing he had come there it was too good a chance to miss. Then after the murder, with the money on him, he started for the city again. But I was coming out. He saw my car and there was no chance, with the flood rising, to pass me without being seen. So he had to turn around and go back to the lodge, pretending it was his first visit."

"And Myra?"

"Birbeck had the money on him, under the raincoat. He was afraid to keep it on him, afraid to hide it in his room. So he hid it on the roof. Miss Wagner saw him doing it and after he'd gone back to his room she went to investigate. But he was watching just in case he had been seen, and he went after her again. She got away with the knife in her, and you know the rest."

"But you said there was no evidence he'd been in and out his window."

"There was the wet towel. He'd gone out wearing only his underwear. When he came in he dried off, so as not to track the floor."

So that was all of it, Judy thought. That was the end. And then, looking at Tom Shaw, seeing the way he looked at her and feeling the quick beating of her heart, she knew it was not the end. For her there would never be an ending for what had started that night.

THE END

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(Continued from page 32)

ured Johnny went in for this stuff wholesale, just that it was between me and him. . . ."

"Okay," I said.

"I was kind of rough with you a couple of times, Kidd—"

"Yes," I said.

He waved his Positive.

"This ties it all up, hey?"

It almost did.

THE RAID of the "Bistro Busters," as the papers called it, was headlined in enough papers throughout the world to convince a bunch of baffled husbands in Pacific City that nothing but a sudden passion for reform had launched their wives' unusual excursion.

The agency located the Chips Collection a few weeks later in an abandoned gold mine in Nevada that Johnny had purchased half a year earlier. Probably had ideas of salting the mine with the gold to explain his possession of it to Uncle. He might have gotten away with it at that. If he had had only the Pacific City cops to cope with.

The slug in Teller's skull was too misshapen to be matched to any gun, but Pacific City law closed the case with Johnny's death. Toni Chips was never brought into it publicly. Nobody else ever learned of her part in it except the psychiatrist, and he used the knowledge to pull her out of her dementia.

She dropped around my Frisco flat a couple of times, but I'd had enough of her mother's cane and I couldn't forget that photo of her knife in Teller's chest. The picture she did of me for the Municipal Museum—the one in which my face is attached to the body of a vulture breakfasting on a dead and decaying horse—was the last straw.

A disappointment was the nurse, Charlotte, who answered my letter explaining why I had abandoned her that wild night with my own letter—unopened.

A surprise was Jean, the mayor's fiery little redhead. She dropped into my flat one night without a letter. She still thought I might be "fun in a booth."

I was.

THE END

COLD TURKEY

(Continued from page 70)

It really wasn't no time till Doc Eames was there, working over Red, for Jasper wouldn't have it no other way. Jug had got Red just under the heart, as Red was dropping Lafe. How Red stayed conscious long enough to put three holes in Jug's potbelly I ain't yet figured out. But Doc Eames got him plugged up, after a bit, and slipped a needle in him. After a minute he opened his eyes, and I be dogged if he didn't fetch a weak grin from somewhere.

"Sheriff," he said to Jasper, his voice just a hoarse whisper, "you come mighty near pushing your luck too far, didn't you?"

If I hadn't knowed it must of been the gunpowder fumes and the pain from his own bullet-smashed shoulder, I'd of sworn Jasper was crying a little as he looked down at Red.

"Robert boy," he said, though he wasn't but a couple years the oldest, "why did you—"

Red laid there pale as death, with that carrot top of his against Jasper's shoulder. Finally he got up enough strength to say a few more words.

"Hell," he said, with a faint spark of the old, cocky Red Connett, "I was too slow! I never meant to give 'em a chance to drop you, Jasper, once you started walking down that slope." He breathed heavily once or twice as Doc Eames' dope begun to hit him, and he looked at us, standing bunched around them. "Marydee needs her a good husband—to make up for a sorry brother!"

So that's how it was. Of course, there wasn't no way out for Red, but to stand his trial. But Judge Kaney Driskill has lived his whole life here in these hills. And like the rest of us, he knows a man when he sees one. So when he handed Red a sentence of ten years, with promise of time off for a good prison record, everyody, including Red Connett himself, was right well pleased.

And I reckon folks are likely to stay pleased, too. For there was something in the way Red Connett held little Bobby Smith up close to his shoulder, there at the station yesterday, and gripped mine and Jasper's hands, that made me know the boy had growed up to be a man, and a good one.

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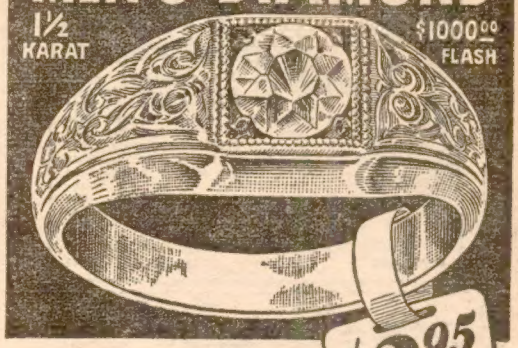

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(Continued from page 76)

Snowdon said, tensely, "Here comes Mike."

At that instant, Jarman lashed out at Burke's face. There is something about fish hooks that makes a man cringe instinctively. Go at him with a club and, chances are, he'll keep his head. But seeing that bunch of hooks raking for his face is too much.

Burke threw up a hand. His gun fired into the floor. The cat squalled and sprang to life, streaking away from the heater. Snowdon cried out a warning to Burke, but he was too late.

Jarman's hand chopped down on Burke's wrist and the gun fell as the shaggy man cried out in pain. Snowdon bent for the gun and met the point of Jarman's shoe, swinging up viciously. Snowdon screamed and fell to the floor, his face seeming to come apart. Blood seeped from between his teeth and a broken jaw.

Jarman said, "That was for my daughter."

He had the gun as heavy footsteps slammed on the porch. No, Mike was not very bright. He ran straight into the shack, firing the rifle, but Jarman's bullet ended him.

Prodding Burke over beside Snowdon, who lay moaning on the floor, Jarman reached for the phone with one hand. He asked the operator for the nearest police station.

"This is Lieutenant Jarman. . . . I'm at a shack near Pirate Cover. . . . Run by a fellow named Burke. . . . That's right. . . . You'd better send somebody down here. . . . I said my name is Lieutenant Jarman. No, not the Army. I'm a detective lieutenant, Homicide Division, Los Angeles Police Department. I'm on a vacation. . . . I *was* on a vacation. . . ."

While Burke glowered and Snowdon moaned, Jarman called his wife. "Tell Donna I'll be home soon. . . . No, nothing happened. I fell asleep on a rock. . . . Just tell her I've been—fishing. . . . Yes, Jane, I know I forgot my wallet. And maybe it was just as well. . . . Sure, I know my badge was in it." He glanced at Snowdon. "It comes in handy sometimes—to forget things like badges."

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AUTO RADIO

1. TONE is first with me. I like my music rich and natural—the way it comes in at home. My Motorola Auto Radio brings it to me that way on the road.

2. When I want a program, I *want* it! I don't like to be confined to nearby, big-power stations. My Motorola brings in *more* stations, clearer and sharper—*wherever* I drive.

3. If I buy a new car, I don't want to lose the investment I've made in a radio. My Motorola can be transferred to my next car, quickly and easily.

TAKE A TIP FROM ME—Get in touch with your Motorola dealer today. And if you're getting a radio in your new car, BE SURE TO SPECIFY

Motorola AUTO Radio

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